

The living voice of the gospel



Revisiting the basic
principles of preaching

JOHAN CILLIERS



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SUN PRESS



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“I did not invent this Word of God and this office. It is God’s Word, God’s work, His office. There we two (i.e., God and I) are one in the cause... It is our confidence, no matter how much the world may boast, that God has qualified us to be ministers, and, secondly, that it is not only pleasing to the heart of God, but also that we shall not preach in vain and this ministry will lift to heaven some few who receive the Word.”

“The office of preaching is an arduous task... I have often said that, if I could come down with a good conscience, I would rather be stretched upon a wheel and carry stones than preach one sermon. For anyone in this office will always be plagued; and therefore I have often said that the damned devil and not a good man should be a preacher. But we’re stuck with it now... If I had known I would not have let myself be drawn into it with 24 horses.” (Martin Luther)

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Preface

Preaching creates the art of space. Within this publication it becomes the in-between of embracement and enfleshment.

Between meaning and nonsense, between text and context; and between preacher and hearer, preaching becomes a synapse: the spark of God's voice is being heard in a very strange mode: Christ the foolishness of God (1 Cor. 1:25).

Within the wounded face of the suffering God, a terrible beauty is created: Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. This "terrible beauty" is being described by the author as the crux of the gospel.

With the author, the reader enters into a space where preaching is no longer the amusement of the crowds, the parroting of a talkative preacher or the boredom on a hot Sunday afternoon. The space created by preaching as the hermeneutics of salvation, becomes a very painful event of understanding. The pain of hearing as the effect of the Spirit gives birth to a cry which reflects the suffering of humankind. This cry can be called the event of hope. Hope as the periscope of the church, the art of seeing the unseen.

This book is like fresh air in a world devoid of meaning. Beyond the now very popular paradigm of liturgy as entertainment, it takes the reader beyond boredom into expectation. Like peppermint crisp, it reminds us of the fact that God and human beings embrace one another in the witness of the gospel.

Johan brings us back to the basics of being the church, i.e. to enflesh the Word. Through preaching life becomes a joyous event; it opens up the art of laughter expressed as a confession: "Where, o death, is your sting?" This should be read in the mode of expectation and anticipation. One should use the imagination of faith in order to rediscover the beauty of God in the ugliness of suffering. This is what this book, and also the Christian faith, is about.

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November 2003

Does preaching (still) have a future?

This chapter will consider a number of critical arguments voiced against preaching:

- The social sciences, especially in the light of the phenomenon of post-modernism
- The communication sciences, focusing on the prevalent culture of images
- Theological sciences, within the perspective of contemporary tendencies
- Church pews – the experiences of ordinary church members, and
- Other pastoral factors, pertaining to the demands made on preachers.

The chapter concludes by suggesting an alternative perspective: preaching as the heart and hope of the church.



1.1 Holy nonsense?

Etched against a wall of what once was Caesar's majestic palace in Rome, a provoking picture, probably drawn by a child thousands of years ago, can still be seen today. The picture is that of a donkey crucified on a cross like a human being. Someone – an unknown Christian – stands and worships this donkey in front of the cross. Across the picture is written in broad, childlike strokes: *Alexsamenos worships his God*.

God, a donkey? On a cross? How could one worship such a God? Let alone preach about Him? Even Paul knew that this strange Gospel, in



which the Cross is central, would always be absurd and ludicrous to some, and a stumbling block and irritation to others (cf 1 Cor 1:18-31).

Foolishness. Complete and utter nonsense. That is preaching. Let us picture the following in our mind's eye: a man or woman stands before a group of people with different backgrounds, needs, personalities and expectations, and opens his/her mouth with the assumption, or at least the hope, that his/her words will, in some way, be transformed into *God's words*. Words that are supposed to heal and save, to comfort and show the way, and ultimately spell out the most profound meaning of our existence. Imagine this God, who orchestrates the pulsating powers of the universe beyond the farthest galaxy, who is the foundation and centre, the beginning and the end of creation and time, who is the living energy in the smallest blade of grass and the mysterious adhesive of the most minuscule concentration of atoms somewhere in a grain of dust. Imagine that this God chooses to speak his mind via the medium of a human word, via a stammering, stuttering human vocal chord ...

But that's not all. Imagine that this God, who chooses, within the coordinates of time and space, to reveal himself through human words, becomes human, is born as a Baby with kicking legs and a dribbling mouth. That this Baby grows up and, on a certain day in history, is nailed to a wooden pole according to ancient cruel tradition, and is left in the elements to die a slow, agonizing death. That this Crucified One is mocked as a donkey. That He arises from the dead on the third day, appears to certain people and demonstrates that He is alive, is taken up to heaven in a cloud and, shortly after this, sends his Spirit to be with his followers until

the end of time. Imagine this strange collection of facts and events now called the *Gospel*, that is *good news*, and that, in preaching, it should be expressed in such a way that, somehow, it mediates light and life to people ...

Surely, this boggles your mind and induces a cynical shake of your head. Perhaps even a disbelieving chuckle. Should you aspire to be a preacher, this is enough to make you drop down onto the bench in the pulpit, overwhelmed by the impossibility of communicating these facts to enlightened people. For, is it not truly madness to still believe all of this now, early in the third millennium? *Foolishness. Complete and utter nonsense!*

Well, many people regard it as such. Many preachers have even abdicated from their belief in preaching, yet still preach every Sunday. They no longer believe anything, or very little, about preaching. They no longer expect anything from the event of the godly Word. They “preach” but, in fact, they merely speak. They say much, but actually they say nothing. They have become professional, religious speakers, no longer people who pronounce words that express and realize the mystery of God’s Gospel.

They are not alone in their distrust of this phenomenon that we call preaching. Already in 1971, A Niebergall (1971:295-320) referred to “*a deep scepticism, a consuming doubt about the task and method, the meaning and purpose of the sermon in general.*”

However, this scepticism concerning preaching is not limited to recent decades or even centuries. Like a pendulum, the experiences surrounding preaching oscillate between exhaustion and inspiration, between giving up and new expectations. Clearly the pendulum was on a negative downswing when, in 1875, Anthony Trollope bemoaned his distrust in preaching as follows:

There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in these realms, the power of compelling an audience to sit silent, and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and untruths, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips ... A member of Parliament can be coughed down or counted out. Town councillors can be tabooed. But no one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age ... the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday’s rest, the incubus that overloads our religion and makes God’s service distasteful. We are not forced into church! No: but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to stay away. We desire, no, we are resolute, to enjoy the comfort of public worship; but we desire also that we may do so without an

amount of tedium which ordinary human nature cannot endure with patience; that we may be able to leave the house of God, without that anxious longing for escape, which is the common consequence of common sermons (Barchester Towers 1857, as quoted by Stott 1982:53-54).

Critique against preaching – that holy piece of nonsense perpetrated every Sunday – can indeed be multiplied. A summary of some of the most important objections in this debate follows:

1.2 Critique from the social sciences

Universally it is accepted that radical shifts are taking place in societies in general, and in South African society in particular. In 1994, South Africa experienced a miraculous transformation from an Apartheid society to a young democracy. Since then, the country has been battling with the legacy of a divided and traumatic past, with issues such as economic justice, poverty, land distribution and also, in recent years, the scourge of Aids. In some areas, we are progressing with leaps and bounds, covering distances that took other countries decades or even centuries. In other respects, tough stumbling blocks are apparent.

In addition to these political, economic and cultural transformations, modernism must also make way for postmodernism – a phenomenon not easily defined, but which holds far-reaching implications for preaching. Some argue that South Africa, and Africa for that matter, is still a far cry from postmodernism; that, in fact, we are now experiencing only a transition from premodernism to modernism. This may be true to a certain extent. But, there is no denying the fact that our young democracy has become part and parcel of the global village and that the wave of postmodernism sweeping the shores worldwide, is also pounding our coastlines with growing intensity. This seems to be a major issue that we must face in the years to come.

From the viewpoint of the social sciences, the critical questions are: Have preachers taken these paradigm shifts into account, or is it “business as usual” on the pulpit? Do they explore new possibilities in sermonic content and methodology? Do they truly understand their audiences now, early in this third millennium? Although I shall not venture too deeply into the swamp of existing perspectives on postmodernism (although I do take a few steps – cf chapter 6), an outline of a preliminary definition is perhaps appropriate, to illustrate something of the challenge of the spirit of the times confronting preachers.

1.2.1 A DEFINITION OF POSTMODERNISM?

To define the phenomenon of postmodernism or postmodernity¹ is no mean task. On the contrary, blue-blooded postmodernists would state that a definition of postmodernism is a *contradictio in terminis*: for a grip on it is not to understand it (cf Adam 1995:1). In fact, postmodernism is:

... a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identities Postmodernism is a style of culture which reflects something of this epochal change, in a depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between "high" and "popular" culture, as well as between art and everyday experience (Eagleton 1996:vii).

Postmodernism can indeed be evaluated and "described" in a variety of ways: from literary, aesthetical, philosophical, scientific, historical, psychological and theological perspectives – often in opposing terms (cf Linn 1996:xiii-xvi).

However, a couple of golden threads that run throughout these perspectives would be themes such as relativism and pluralism. According to postmodernism, "truth" is multi-faceted, relational and uncertain. Life is viewed as too complex to be changed or even described by a sermon prepared by an individual. A sermon is simply too monotonous to resonate the poliphony of a pluralist society. In fact, in many congregations, one experiences a growing diversity in spirituality, views on the church and the world, religious perceptions, etc. When the statistical reality of age and, increasingly, also cultural differences are added to this, preaching appears to be more and more an absolute impossibility!

In accordance with these societal shifts, the role of the church has also changed dramatically. The church no longer represents the heart of each town or city, no longer is respected as an authoritative voice in parliament

1 The concept *postmodernism* normally refers to a form of contemporary culture, whilst *postmodernity* describes a specific historical period. For the sake of uniformity I will be using the term *postmodernism* throughout this book. (Cf. Eagleton:1996:vii.)

or the fountain of all truth under the sun. Preaching no longer is accepted as obvious. On the contrary, it is questioned, criticized or, at least, ignored.

1.2.2 AN EVALUATION OF POSTMODERNISM?

How then should preachers evaluate the spirit of postmodernism? Three brief, critical comments follow:

- *Postmodernism is an era, not a panacea.* Like any other historical period, as regards preaching, it contains potential for enrichment or impoverishment. Postmodernism offers no panacea against all the ills of modernism, only a reaction that, in turn, calls for other reactions. It is clear that the phenomenon of postmodernism should not be accepted uncritically by homiletics, nor should it be rejected outright. To conclude, for example, with a mere: “*We must go to war against postmodernism inside and outside the church*” (Osborne 1999:112), in my opinion, is short-sighted. What is called for, rather, is a responsible theological evaluation and implementation of postmodernism. Like modernism, postmodernism is not all evil, nor is it entirely good.
- *Postmodernism is a conclusion, not a completely new development.* It protests justifiably against modernism, but, speaking historically, this protest has been predisposed a long time ago. Postmodernism is not an unexpected bolt from the blue, but, in a certain sense, it is the logical (!) consequence and culmination of modernism. It is a sort of review on, and even autopsy of, modernism and, in this sense, it is impossible to separate it from modernism. In fact, many committed postmodernists would probably be appalled to discover what consequent modernists, in reality, they are! Wolfgang Iser (1988:9-14) is right when he speaks about “*unsere postmoderne Moderne*” and warns against the “*Magie des falschen Namens*.” No watertight division exists between the so-called premodern, modern and postmodern eras, rather an inter-connectedness, like the bases of icebergs meeting and fusing below the surface of the sea. The core of each epoch is already present in a preceding or succeeding epoch. Therefore, the essence of what comes after postmodernism, is also already hidden in the creases of the contemporary cloth.
- *Postmodernism is repetition, not revolution.* Only a faint historical consciousness is necessary to know that the ancient philosopher’s words are true: “*What has happened before will happen again. What has been done before will be done again. There is nothing new in the whole world*” (Ecc 1:9). Many of the basic tenures of postmodernism are evident in other peri-

ods, perhaps in a different historical coat, but the same in essence.² In any case, how enduring postmodernism will turn out to be, is an open question. Some reckon that we have already passed through it, while others are of the opinion that we have not yet reached the periphery of it, especially in South Africa. Whilst some are already beyond postmodernism, others are still struggling to shed modernism. These facts call for objectivity and discernment for making the best choice (Php 1:10).

1.3 Critique from the communication sciences

Together with the postmodern paradigm shift in society, there have been changes in patterns of communication and the sciences. A traditional sermon sticks out like a sore thumb in this new communicational environment. According to some analysts, such a sermon represents an era gone by – an anachronism like a paraffin lamp being lit in an age of nuclear power! The changes in the communication media and information technology, in contrast, has ousted the Gutenberg era of printing in favour of a new communicational mode of *image and imagination*. (Chapter 6 returns to this in greater detail.)

1.3.1 A CULTURE OF IMAGES

Images are taking over society. From the moment that we (as postmodern people?) open our eyes in the morning, until we put out the light at night, one image after another – often simultaneously – converges on us in feverish competition for our attention. The morning paper burns the first images into our consciousness: the floods in the townships on the Cape Flats, the President saluting his loyal supporters, the muscular rugby player scoring a try whilst being tackled by three other players.

On our way to work, a gallery of images from advertisements, election promises, and road signs accompany us. In the evenings, clusters of neon lights flash their messages at us. At work, icons on the computer take us on

2 For example: does the Greek philosopher Heraclitus not already articulate the postmodern concept of *relativity* with his reference to *panta rei* (literally: everything is in flux, reality can never be fixed and therefore also never be defined)? And did the Jewish tradition of *midrash* not long ago already stress (far more eloquently than postmodernism!) that texts have *multidimensional meanings*? Are texts not honoured in Judaism exactly because of their paradoxical, ironical and scandalous nature? (Cf. Janse van Rensburg 2000:13; also Brueggemann 1993:55)

a tour through cyber space, where sound and colour, image and movement enfold new worlds before our very eyes – one dimensional, three dimensional, multi-dimensional – where will this “virtual reality” end?

In the evenings, we lounge in front of the Big Box. As addicts, we stare at the flickering screen, absorb images of the suffering of other people in other continents, images of fighting factions in the Middle East, of American bombs dropping on Baghdad, of hungry children with big, questioning eyes and bony hands holding up empty plates. Fortunately, these images pass by quickly, and we shift our weight in our comfortable chairs to concentrate on the next picture appearing before our eyes, perhaps an image from outer space, a satellite’s view of our blue planet, commentated on with the weather for the day ...

Images have taken over virtually every space of our existence. So-called pristine spaces have also been contaminated. We cannot escape the advertising industry’s icons for the consumer – like bloodhounds they stick to our trails. A beach evokes images of suntanned bodies and Ambre Solaire suntan cream; waving cornfields – impressions of Weetbix-eating families; and a farmstall with an approaching old Ford truck – memories of sweating people gulping down Coca-Cola. Even the most intimate spaces have been invaded: the labour ward becomes a launching pad for a newborn baby’s bungee jump, the cemetery functions as décor for a reminder to buy life insurance before your time runs out. From the cradle to the grave, from morn till night, from one season of life until the next, images hound us, call us, seduce us – and not always to our benefit.

Already way back in 1969, Harvey Cox (1969:109) warned against this seduction, writing as follows about this neon culture:

... it relies on sensory overload. It induces a different dimension of awareness, not by depriving the senses of stimuli, but by pounding the senses with so many inputs and at such speed that the normal sorting mechanisms cannot cope ... The effect is quite accurately described by the phrase, “mind-blowning.”

This indeed is the irony of our times: whilst surrounded by images, our imagination (i.e. creativity) is threatened in its most profound essence (Kearny 1988:3).

Images are taking over from reality. They even tend to *precede* the reality that they should reflect. In fact, reality has become a vague reflection of images. This is evident at various levels of society. In politics, the media campaign often “creates” men and women. Politicians are often elected on the grounds of their media image (grossly overrated and blown out of proportion). The media choreographs and portrays an image in such a man-

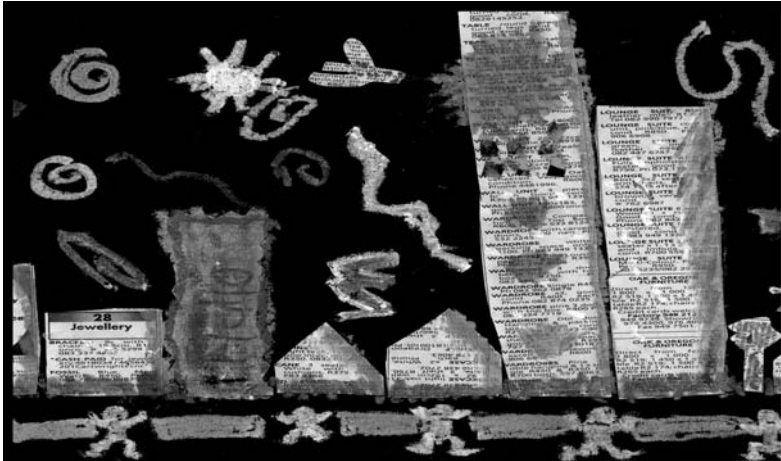
ner that its tail wags the dog of reality. Newsflashes can be compiled in such a manner that a molehill not only becomes a small mountain, but Mount Everest! In the world of economics, a general rule applies: create a need by means of images and more images of “successful” and “happy” people who use the golden, advertised product. The art of advertising indeed has become a highly specialized science, creating reality (needs) for consumers by means of strategically planned codes (although they are often invisible to the naked eye), or simply by means of massive advertising campaigns to convert people to the product in any possible way.

The irony is: we have become desensitized, at least, to those images that really count. An image only occasionally crosses our path calling us to our senses from our icon slumber. The mere uttering of the phrase, *11 September 2001*, for instance, awakens such an image. Who can ever forget the passenger aeroplanes exploding like burning missiles into the World Trade Center’s twin towers in New York? Words alone could not describe such an event. *It was too ghastly for words*. Images had to paint the whole gruesome picture before our eyes, a picture that was repeatedly repainted on our television screens and seared into our global, collective consciousness.



My children drew pictures of this event shortly after it happened. It was clear that, for them, the impression of the aeroplanes crashing into the

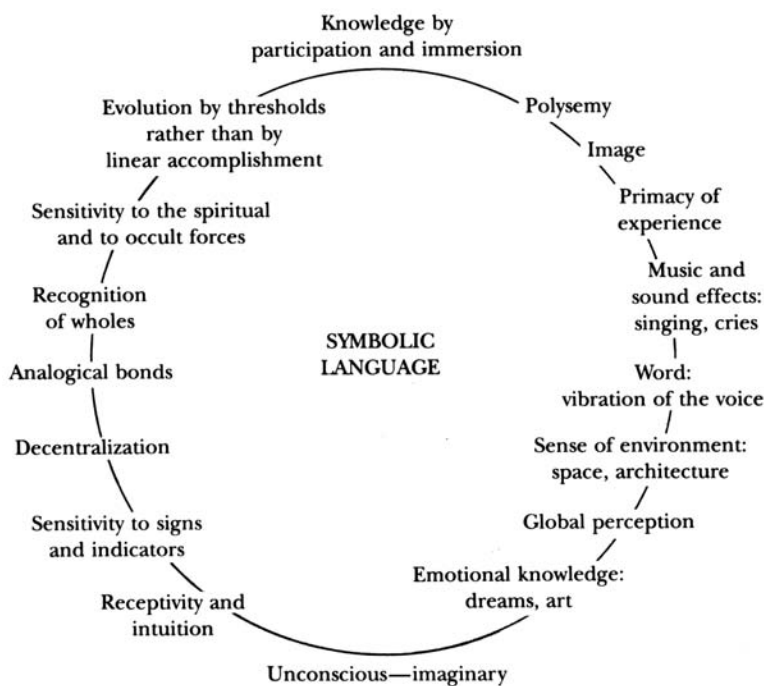
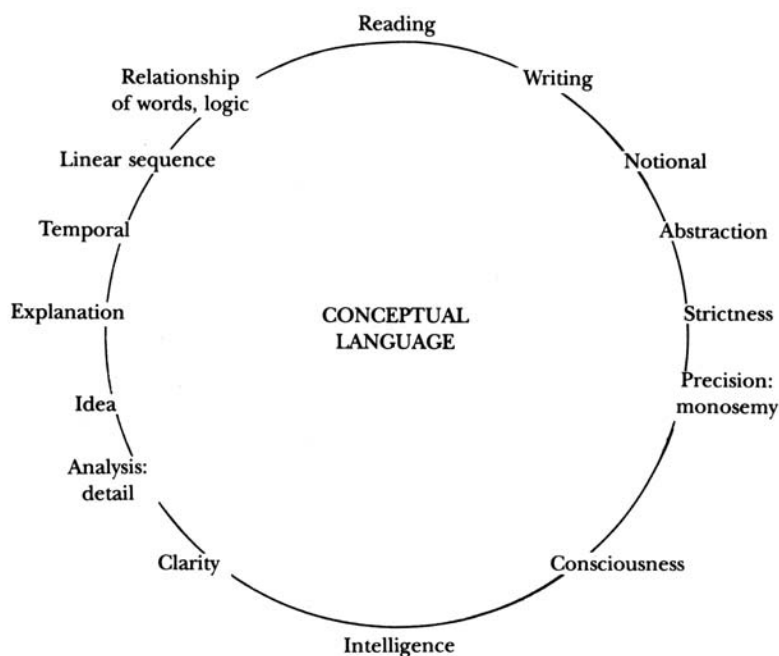
skyscrapers had become a type of icon of contemporary urban and even global terrorism.³



The world has indeed become small. Global images appear in our living rooms. Yet, this is but the tip of an iceberg. Observers predict that the next five to ten years will usher in an explosion of information technology at an unprecedented scale. The internet is throwing its web ever wider and deeper into the pool of knowledge. Computers are becoming smaller, faster, more effective and more powerful. Cell phones have become centres for virtually all forms of communication. In future, could one process all that one needs for life, and die while being comforted by merely pressing a button on one's watch/personal microchip?

The Gutenberg printing era has become a vague memory for many. The culture of the image is replacing the culture of books. In fact, some state that we have entered an era in which the art of reading may become an anachronism, a mere nostalgic luxury (cf Kearny 1988:2). The century of the script must make way for the century of imagination. Icons are replacing concepts, and images are replacing words. Or rather, conceptual language is fading away in favour of symbolic language. Pierre Babin (1991:150-151) applies the following diagram to illustrate this shift in emphasis:

3 There of course also exist other interpretations of this event. Billy Graham for instance compared the fall of the World Trade Center with that of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11). The image of the Bible is thus used to *demythologize* the images of the newspapers and television!



In summary, “warm” communication is taking a back seat to “cool” communication (McLuhan). This means, *inter alia*, that sermons that are essentially logical, sequential and linear, are (or should be) replaced by sermons that implement other intuitive and participatory instruments for the transference of knowledge.

According to the above-mentioned critical voices, traditional sermons tend to be monologues that, indeed, are the worst form of communication imaginable. However, I would hesitate to agree with R White who defines a sermon as a “*monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes*”! What is needed is a dialogue, a discourse within the space provided by the ecumenical church and the local congregation. (For a further discussion, cf chapter 5.)

But, research has shown that traditional sermons apparently have little effectiveness. Besides the fact that few people can remember or articulate the basic message of sermons, the number of people who are transformed by sermons, seems to be even less. The critical voice from the perspective of the communication sciences states that the time has come for the format of preaching to be changed drastically, especially in an *imaginative fashion*.

This, however, does not seem to be happening. John Bluck (1989:33), a communication scientist, contends that in virtually all the essential points of good communication, preaching is losing the struggle and, in fact, is degenerating:

- As a public event (preaching is losing its meaning and public appeal for the general public)
- As a form of art that can adopt more than one form (preaching is becoming increasingly uniform and just boring)
- As an event that takes place on behalf of, and in a sense belonging to, the congregation (preaching is becoming increasingly individualistic, becoming the preacher’s “property”), and
- As a deed of faith, in which the preacher’s own convictions are divulged (the preacher becomes a “professional orator” who, as a church functionary, can transfer the message “objectively”).

1.4 Critique from the theological sciences

Some theologians point out that preaching is still being influenced by Karl Barth’s so-called Word theology. According to this critique, preachers therefore lose sight of the human and communicative components of preaching, and devote too little attention to the *real* people with *real* contexts facing them in the moment of preaching. Without a doubt, this is a

legitimate concern: preaching that does not face these contexts squarely, cannot truly be called preaching (cf also chapter 5).

Others refer to the phenomenon of moralism that is still virulent in our preaching. Apparently, it continually creeps back into our sermons and, over many years, has conditioned so many that one could ask justifiably whether they can still hear the *Gospel*? Add to this the fact that traditional sermons are mostly introvert in essence, that, in fact, traditional sermons are concerned mainly with the religious needs of individuals, or perhaps congregations, but do not necessarily address the daily wider ethical and social needs and issues. This state of affairs goes hand in hand with the phenomenon of moralism. In fact, moralistic sermons are always unethical. And, sadly enough, this is how preaching mostly takes place in the institutional sense of the word. Surely, all of this is enough to cause sermon fatigue to overwhelm you, especially if you intend to be a discerning listener to a sermon!

Already in 1959, G Ebeling (quoted in Runia 1981:9) sighed because of what he called “institutionally guaranteed banalities”:

We need only consider our own experiences objectively to come to the conclusion that we need to generate a good amount of goodwill towards the average sermon, at least if we do not want to become bored or bitter, sarcastic or melancholic. What energy is not put into the preaching of the Christian faith throughout the whole country, but is it not – but for a few exceptions – institutionally guaranteed banalities that we hear?

But, here the theological critique does not stop. In South African theological and church circles the debate about the authority of Scripture is vehement at present (cf also chapter 4). This evokes crucial questions for preaching, for example: Can the Bible (still) be preached? What is true in it and what is not? Is the Bible fallible? People wonder about these and other questions, for example: Is there a loss of confidence in the Gospel? Or in preachers? Or perhaps in the church? The widespread call for liturgical renewal exacerbates these uncertainties. This, as such, is not wrong, but sometimes the sermon is reduced ultimately to a short postscript at the end of the worship service. The basic question of many people is: Is the sermon really still appropriate?

Perhaps the strongest critique against preaching still stems from the nature of the Gospel itself. For, as stated in the introduction to this book (1.1), the Gospel is a scandal (*skandalon*), an example of the utter *failure of communication between God and humans* (Bohren). The Gospel is not “successful” per se. How then can one expect preaching to be successful?

1.5 Critique from the church pews

Perhaps this is the critique that preachers want to hear least of all. Large numbers of congregants – also faithful, believing congregants – suffer in silence or declare that preaching is, or has become, boring, irrelevant and disappointing and many church members vote with their feet by leaving the church. This could happen for legitimate or more dubious reasons, but the fact remains that it does happen. People have become tired of many words and, in this age of quick-fixes and instant communication, they also tend to want a quick-fix Gospel, or something other than what the church is offering.

Let us be candid about this: many members are disillusioned with the church. And let us concede that we, the ministers and the church, cannot boast a history of “sound proclamation” of the Word. On the contrary, we have often adapted the Gospel to suit our own agendas and beliefs. Dare we, for instance, forget how a part of the church in South Africa recently supported the ideology linked to Apartheid? Because of factors such as these, people are asking: Who knows whether ministers are telling the truth *now*?

Are these questions related to an overrated expectation of what preaching can and should do? Or perhaps to a misunderstanding concerning the role and place of preaching within the broader framework of congregational life and the worship service? Whatever the case may be, the disillusionment with preaching seems to be growing. Church members bemoan the fact that church services have little, if any, relevance to their daily realities; that there is little continuity from Sunday to Sunday; that ministers often completely underestimate their audiences and treat them like spiritual children, or overestimate them and exasperate them with illustrious, but nonsensical religious words. And so we can resonate endlessly the critique from the church pews. The song (freely translated from the Dutch) by the Dutch singer, Stef Bos, may be prejudiced, but it lingers in one’s memory in all its bitterness:

*It is fabricated in Friesland
and has a royal name
there are also other makes
but this one has most fame*

*You can suck on it for long
even break your teeth on it
And when I sat in church
I received my peace from it*

Peppermint

Peppermint

*If the sermon starts to bore you
and your ears become all blunt*

Peppermint

Peppermint

*It is the Protestant cocaine
for the Reformed junk*

*When the minister got going
against war and all its pains
and when I'd finished counting
all the leaden window panes
out of my mother's handbag
would come this medicine
the trusted little white pill
with which the pain to still*

*This is the Protestant sacrament
the Reformed form of drugs
and if there were no church at all
then also not this
p-p-p-p... peppermint*

A little girl probably best expressed the resentment against preaching when, five minutes into the sermon, she whispered to her mother in a voice audible to all: *"Oh mummy, pay the man now so we can go!"*

1.6 Pastoral factors

As if the above-mentioned critical voices are not enough, other voices – no, rather sighs – rise from the hearts of the ministers themselves. Some of the most repeated are the following: "How can I prepare to preach on a Sunday when so many other, often inhuman, claims are made on us, as ministers? Is it physically and emotionally possible within the present structure of congregational life for ministers to really focus on preaching as they should?" According to legend, the bishop of the great Saint Augustine once asked him to preach on Easter Sunday. He promptly applied for leave already in January in order to prepare thoroughly for his Easter sermon! Most ministers do not enjoy the luxury of extended holidays, and are not oratorical giants like Saint Augustine. Yet, they must

enter the pulpit Sunday after Sunday and find words to articulate God's Word to their listeners ...

Preachers are human beings, not angels, although some people – and from time to time preachers themselves! – tend to think so. Factors, such as the preachers' self-image and limited insights, as well as their personality types come into play. Sometimes, preachers struggle with the experience of having *heard* nothing in the Biblical text or from the Lord; yet, they must *preach* on Sunday. How on earth is it possible to say something new every Sunday?

When events at the current stage of your life often determine your preaching, how do you preach the richness of the Gospel? How do you compete with other, seemingly far superior, forms of communication? How do you, for instance, deal with the tension between the information technology of the third millennium (television, powerpoint, WebCt – to name but a few) and the work of the Holy Spirit? Where do you, as a preacher, fit in? (For a detailed discussion of a preacher's role in the process of sermon making, cf chapter 6.)

However, enough of critical voices and questions. Perhaps now is the time to revisit some basic points of departure and definitions concerning preaching and to ask ourselves: What am I doing when I preach? What do I expect from a sermon? What do I believe regarding preaching? Yes, what on earth *is* a sermon? Wherein does its secret lie? The next chapter will direct attention to these and similar questions.

Nevertheless, prior to this and as a point of departure, I would like to articulate my own convictions regarding preaching.

1.7 Preaching: The heart and hope of the church

1.7.1 PREACHING: THE HEART OF THE CHURCH

I believe that preaching still has an important function to fulfil in the ministry, in and through the congregation. The church would suffer severe harm if, in some or other way, preaching should be devalued or neglected and if, in our attempts to renew, we do not also examine preaching profoundly. In fact, research has proven that preaching is basic and central to the edification of a congregation, and that edification is impossible without preaching (Nel 2001:5). However, preaching must not be overestimated, but neither underestimated. A congregation is more than a worship service, and a worship service is more than a sermon. Sermons are merely modest texts, but they are links between the biblical testimony of what God *has done*, and his current deeds in our midst (Den Dulk 1999:28).

Preaching is essential for the welfare of the church. Yet, it seems as though preaching, indeed, is degenerating. This is a sad reality, but I would still describe preaching as the heart of the church (Luther: *cor ecclesiae*). Preaching is a display window, whether or not we are aware of it. It remains a kind of barometer of the church that reflects the church's state of health. One could justifiably say: *as the preaching, so the church; as the church, so the preaching*. In concrete preaching, many aspects culminate: the preacher's dogmatics, ethics, scriptural view, historical awareness, pastoral and exegetical skills, hermeneutical capacity, psychological, emotional and spiritual maturity, and much more. Concrete sermons paint pictures of theological and church (therefore human!) activities – colourful and exciting, or drab and boring. They bear witness to either regeneration, or degeneration.

1.7.2 PREACHING: AN ACT OF HOPE

As a basic point of departure, I confess that I believe in preaching. Even in the face of the above critical voices in this chapter, I believe that preaching is still one of the most hopeful acts in which we can participate. In fact, to preach is to hope. *Preaching is a concentrated form of Christian hope*. It often takes place in spite of the fact that there are apparently no, or few, results, often against the odds of seemingly overwhelming powers and factors, often as the persistence of enduring hope. A number of expectations energize hopeful preaching, for example:

- The fact that preaching can indeed change people. One of Luther's well-known expressions is: *the Word of God comes to change us*. This witness is also found in Scripture, although Scripture does not refer to preaching in the traditional, church-historical sense of the word. The proclamation of the Word has various biblical forms, for example, as shorter acts of witnessing, longer expositions before larger audiences, or basic apostolic confessions concerning the Lordship of Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, the basis of these forms of preaching is not the complete canon as we know it now, but mainly the Old Testament, oral witnesses about Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection and, possibly, fragments of certain New Testament writings. Whatever the case may be, preaching has served the continuation of the Gospel by transforming people. When Peter preached on the first day of Pentecost, the people's hearts were struck and they asked: "What should we do?" (Ac 2:37). When Philip proclaimed the Gospel in Samaria, a whole city was in turmoil, resulting in great joy (Ac 8:4-8). When Paul preached about Christ in Philippi, the Lord opened the heart of a woman named Lydia

(Ac 16:14). And so we could continue. This also happened during the course of church history. *Preaching still remains an instrument through which God transforms people.*

- The fact that preaching is not an empty word, but a word in which God is present and speaks. When preaching, our most profound hope probably resides in this fact. In some or other (often inexplicable) way, God encounters people through preaching. When Peter speaks about the gifts within the congregation, amongst others also the gift of preaching, he elaborates: *Whoever preaches must preach God's messages. His or her words should be like words of God* (1 Pe 4:11). However, it is important not to interpret these and similar utterances in a mechanical or automatic sense. Rather as a confession and, therefore, also as an admonition; yes, a longing and a prayer that that our words become God's words in our sermons. *Prayer remains the most basic structure of all hopeful preaching* – a truth that this book will emphasize repeatedly.
- The fact that preaching may contribute to the revelation of the (revealed!) mystery of Christ (cf Col 4:3). Preaching, in which God speaks, is always Trinitarian by nature, but this does not exclude the fact that it may also be Christ-centric by nature. This is no contradiction, rather an inherent theological relationship. The apostolic preaching of the New Testament, for example, always finds its focus in events surrounding Christ. It is God who acts in Christ, the Father who reveals his heart, and the Spirit who confirms this. Therefore, Paul could state without hesitation that it was his intention to speak to the Corinthians about *nothing but Jesus Christ and especially his death on the cross* (1 Cor 2:2). When Luther said that *we are to preach nothing but Jesus Christ (nihil nisi Christus praedicandus)*, he also implied that all lines converge on Christ and that, from Him, all rays of light shine forth. Herein, in the proclamation, and therefore, also in the presence of Christ, lies the essence of all hopeful preaching. Indeed, *Christ is our hope* (1 Tim 1:1; cf also chapter 3).

In summary: I believe that preaching is one of the most crucial events that can take place in our world and time. Lloyd-Jones (1976:9) is spot on when he states:

Preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called ... the most urgent need in the Christian Church is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and the most urgent need in the Church, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also.

We preachers, together with all of the church, have been entrusted with

words that the world needs and, consciously or subconsciously, yearns for. Sometimes, people may laugh at us, ridicule us, reject us, but we have received words that make all the difference. With this conviction, I am writing this book.

Without the donkey on the cross, the world is lost.

The mystery of preaching: A blending of voices on the pulpit

This chapter contains the formulation of a preliminary definition of preaching, by examining:

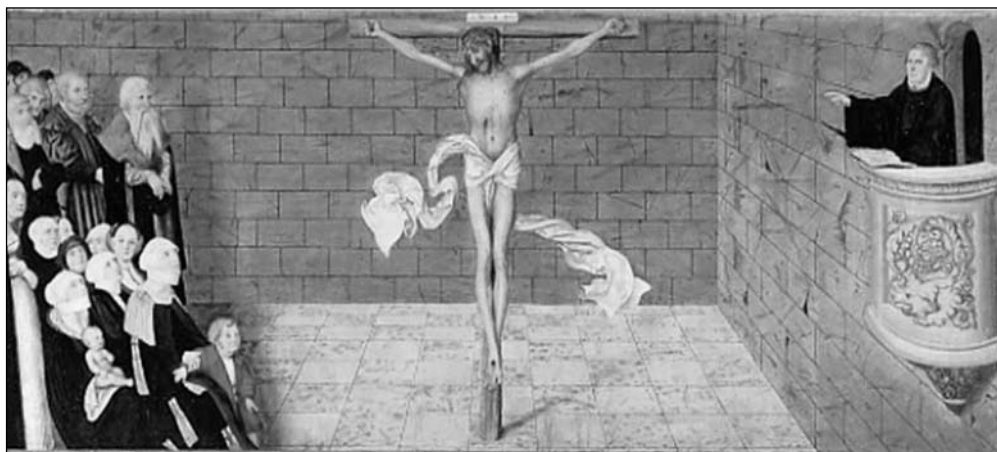
- The four basic elements of preaching, and
- The relationship between the above-mentioned four elements in terms of the concepts, *voice* and *play*.



2.1 A visit to the art gallery

What is a sermon and how do you define it? To answer these questions, let's visit the art gallery – which we shall do more often in this book. In this case, the art gallery is a church, the well-known Stadtkirche in Wittenberg, Germany, where we find a fascinating altar composition, painted by Lucas Cranach (Snr) in 1565. The theme that attracts our attention on a particular part of the composition, represents Martin Luther while preaching.

It is a remarkable painting: Here, all the basic elements of preaching have been combined in an aesthetical fashion. These are the elements that constitute preaching – should only one of them be lacking, even now early in the third millennium, there can be no preaching, at least not in the classical Christian sense of the word.



- The first element that attracts our attention is also the focal point of the painting: Christ the Crucified. The manner in which the cloth is draped around Him – as though flapping in the wind – suggests the wonder of the resurrection. The power of the resurrection is already exerting its force on the body of the crucified One, because, the Crucified is the Resurrected, just as the Resurrected is the Crucified. In my opinion, this focal point of the painting illustrates two essential elements of preaching, namely:
 - That preaching of the Gospel is always a salvific act of God with the crux in Christ, the Crucified and Resurrected (cf also chapter 3).
 - That, in fact, the One, whose Name is called out in preaching, is present. Preaching is not an empty word, but a filled Word, a word-filled-with-the-Word.
- The second element of preaching portrayed in the painting is the open Bible in front of Luther, the preacher. Now, early in the third millennium, this picture is still valid. There will always be a preacher witnessing about the presence of the living God while using the Bible as inspiration. Should the Bible be removed from the picture, there can be no preaching. But, of course, this implies that the Bible functions as it should. The One who is pointed out, is the One of whom the Scriptures witness. There is no tension between the two, the witness and the Subject of the testimony. On the contrary, in their correlation lies, amongst others, the secret and power of preaching. In a certain sense, one could say: to the degree that the preaching honours the written testimony of the Scriptures, the Subject of the witness will become visible and known. Yes,

without the Spirit, the letter is dead; the Spirit indeed breathes its life into the letter, this particular letter that we call the Holy Scriptures (cf 2 Cor 3:6). Without this letter, through which the Spirit works, preaching would be inconceivable and impossible (cf also chapter 4).

- In the painting, the third constituent of preaching is the congregation. Their eyes are not (primarily) fixed on the preacher, but on the crucified and risen Christ. Here, a specific congregation is portrayed, neither fictional nor ideal people, but people who belong to a certain time, place and culture. They represent a specific context in this picture. The preacher communicates with them in their language and conceptual sphere, within their retentive abilities and idiomatic and symbolic world. They *understand* what is being said. The preacher mediates the crucified and risen Christ to them in such a fashion that the words *about* Him are transformed into a vision *of Him*. Hearing becomes seeing, a seeing that makes sense in, and for, their lives, and makes a difference in their specific situations of need and crisis (cf also chapter 5).
- The fourth element is the preacher himself. Preaching without a preacher is unimaginable. His/her function is to point towards Christ, as Luther does in the painting. Preachers, who enter the pulpit, are human beings, not angels. They also belong to a specific time and culture, speak a certain language and have a past, present and future. Each preacher has a personality and a spirituality, is *part* of the congregation and, as such, joins the congregation in looking towards Christ, the focal point, but who, having been called officially to be a preacher, is also set *apart* from the congregation in a sense. One could argue that the separation of preacher and congregation in the painting suggests a type of hierarchy, a schism between the so-called expert and the laity. But surely this was not the intention? The preacher indeed is part of the congregation, and the goal of his/her office is not to obstruct the view on Christ, not to come between the congregation and Christ, but rather to be a mediator, a pointer towards Christ. (Cf the sermon on John the Baptist at the end of this chapter, also chapter 6.)

To summarize: in the painting we see the crucified, resurrected Christ who is the God who saves, the biblical text, the congregation and the preacher. The relationship between these four elements determines the preaching. The wonder of preaching takes place when, through an act of the Spirit, these elements converge to become so related that God reveals Himself to a congregation through the Bible and the preacher. In this blending of voices, this interplay, lies the promise and challenge of that which we call “preaching.” Within this matrix, this fourfold relationship, the miracle can take place, i.e. the words of preaching become words and Word of God.

2.2 Words, words, words ...

But, what is the relationship between our words and God's Word? According to legend, the renowned humorist, Mark Twain, after attending a church service, said to the minister: "*I have heard this sermon of yours before. In fact, I have already heard it several times.*" The minister immediately started to defend himself by saying: "*Impossible. All my sermons are original. During the past week I personally wrote this sermon with great difficulty, and delivered it for the first time today. You definitely have not heard it before.*" "*We shall see,*" Mark Twain replied with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, and left.

The next day, a neatly wrapped parcel arrived at the minister's door. Upon opening it, he found it to be a tome, a dictionary. Inside it, Twain had put a slip of paper upon which was written: *Words, just words, just words* Standing with the dictionary in his hands, the minister was speechless. He realized that Twain was right. Sermons do exist of words. Mostly fine words, important words, well-chosen words.

From a certain perspective, one could even say that sermons are nothing but a flood of discourse, a stream of words that leaves our mouths and rains down onto the heads and ears of the audience. In a sense, sermons could be nothing else: they *are* made up of words. Who ascends the pulpit, does so to speak, to address the audience with words.

But, is that all? Do sermons merely contain words, words, only words – or is there another dimension, a deeper mystery beyond the superficiality of words? The question is: How must the stream of words flow; how must the words be arranged to truly form a *sermon*? What truly makes our sermons rich in God's Word?⁴

2.3 A definition of preaching: Voices blending on the pulpit

In other words: What is a sermon? And does preaching still make sense? What is the mystery of preaching? There is no recipe. Those who under-

4 Of course, this is not a new question. Many books have been written on the relation between the Word of God and the many words of preaching. It concerns the profound question: What is the relation between revelation and existence, and what are the homiletical implications thereof? A classic example of this is the critique sometimes presented to Karl Barth's homiletics, i.e. that he was purported to place such emphasis on a "Word theology" that no room remained for the human subject – a critique which, in my opinion, is not justified forthwith (cf also 2.3; also Daiber 1983:93 and Josuttis 1973:22-43).

stand “mystery” in the title of chapter 2 as a “recipe,” have interpreted it incorrectly. There is no rhetorical ten-point plan that can transform us, as though with a magic wand (overnight – mostly on Saturday nights!), into masters of sermons. Therefore, I offer what follows with trepidation, in the knowledge that it is preliminary and fragmentary, while Augustine’s words on preaching could apply as well to this perspective on preaching:

And I ... who took it upon myself to talk to you, remember who I am and what I have taken upon myself. Because I have taken this upon myself to proclaim Godly things – and I am a person; spiritual things – and I am carnal; eternal things – and I am mortal ... According to my measure I receive what I minister to you. When the door is opened, I graze with you; when closed, I knock with you (cf Van Oort 1991:8; also 1989:85).

As mentioned before, in preaching, a variety of activities pass through the funnel of proclamation. One could say: consciously or unconsciously, in preaching a “mixing” of at least four types of language or grammar takes place, flowing together in the stream of words, i.e. the voices of the preacher, the biblical text, the congregation (context) and that of God. Viewed at an empirical-linguistic level, these four categories could apply to Mark Twain’s many words. After all, the *preacher’s* voice resounds from the pulpit, a voice that introduces the person of the preacher consciously or unconsciously. Furthermore, he/she quotes a *biblical text* or interprets the theological content thereof, so that the voice of the text becomes audible. Hopefully, an interaction between preacher and congregation takes place. This presumes that the preacher, while preparing the sermon, has heard the *congregation’s* voice. And, normally, he/she prepares the sermon with the presumption or faith that *God Himself*, in some or other way, will be at issue, and that His voice will be audible. *To my knowledge, the mystery of preaching is much about the way in which these verbal categories are linked and are theologically integrated*, with the way in which these voices find each other in consensus and uniformity. However, all experienced preachers could testify that this is no easily solved mystery!

There are quite a number of homileticsians who accept that the above-mentioned four factors are essential for the process of preparing a sermon. Van der Geest (1981:62) and Wardlaw (1983:64) concentrate more on three external constituents, i.e. preacher, text and congregation, yet they presume that God, in some or other way through his Spirit, must be at issue in the sermon. Others, such as Patte (1984:21ff), Craddock (1985:22ff), Bailey (1991:60) and Bohren (1971:547ff), apply the four elements explicitly in their homiletical reflection (Bohren, especially, when he also introduces a framework for an analytical preaching method).

It is interesting to note that Karl Barth's preaching definition – already formulated in 1961 – also contains something of these four components, and that he thus did not leave space for the human element in his emphasis on the revelatory character of preaching, as often maintained. An observant reader will recognize, without much difficulty, the above-named four “pillars of preaching” in the following:

1. *Preaching is the Word of God which he himself has spoken; but God makes use, according to his good pleasure, of the ministry of a man who speaks to his fellow men, in God's name, by means of a passage from Scripture. Such a man fulfils the vocation to which the Church has called him and, through his ministry, the Church is obedient to the mission entrusted to her.*
2. *Preaching follows from the command given to the Church to serve the Word of God by means of a man called to this task. It is this man's duty to proclaim to his fellow men what God himself has to say to them, by explaining, in his own words, a passage from Scripture which concerns them personally (Barth 1964:65).*

It is generally accepted that a meaningful and theologically justified coherence among the four components must be found. But how? How do we know whether, or when, the convergence has taken place? What determines the point or moment of fusion? Three comments on this follow.

2.3.1 A BLENDING OF VOICES AS A GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Is this something that one can ever, or even should, analyze? Is the blending of voices not rather something that one can merely experience as a gift and, therefore, can expect? From the evangelical side, Lloyd-Jones (1976:324-325), for example, writes in this vein on the work of the Spirit in preaching:

How do we recognize this when it happens? Let me try to answer. The first indication is in the preacher's own consciousness You cannot be filled with the Spirit without knowing it How does one know it? It gives clarity of thought, clarity of speech, ease of utterance, a great sense of authority and confidence as you are preaching, an awareness of a power not your own thrilling through the whole of your being, and an indescribable sense of joy What about the people? They sense it at once; they can tell the difference immediately. They are gripped, they become serious, they are convicted, they are moved, they are humbled What then are we to do about this? There is only one obvious conclusion. Seek Him! Seek Him! ... But go beyond seeking Him; expect Him.

Without doubt, the mystery of preaching lies in the working of the Spirit. The secret of preaching – the theological integration of the voices – is profoundly a *pneumatological mystery*. The Spirit links the voices of the preacher, the text and of the congregation to become God's voice. This *is* so. But, although this confession of faith is true and can be confirmed, it does not help us much further, speaking methodologically. Can we do anything other than seek and expect? Or else, stated more positively: Is it not, in fact, the pneumatology that grants us the freedom to “colour in” methodologically this search and expectation? Spirit and method may never adopt contrary stances (Bohren 1971:76ff).

2.3.2 CONTRARY VOICES AS THEOLOGICAL DISINTEGRATION

Or, perhaps we come closer to solving the mystery of the integration of voices if we take note of the antipole – of which there are more than enough examples! In fact, the integration may become clearer when we examine the phenomenon of disintegration under the microscope. Because, when this relation, this integration, is twisted to some or other side, then preaching will suffer. In fact, it will be affected in its very being – and a preaching analysis could indicate this.⁵ Broadly speaking, this could, for example, happen:

- When the preacher loves his/her own voice (or selected theological themes) above all else. Then the minister's voice silences the other voices in the sermon, and it becomes a monologue.
- When the sermon exists merely of the “correct exegesis” of the biblical text. Then it becomes inhuman; without the preacher's flesh-and-blood testimony and the congregational context, the illusion usually exists that it is “just the Bible” being proclaimed.
- If the congregation's voice or context drowns out all other voices. Such sermons could seemingly sound relevant, but would result in the *Gospel-for-the-times* being *lost*.
- When the preacher proffers “the voice of God” as though it came straight from heaven without any human or contextual content. The danger often exists that such preachers do not tolerate any contradiction or counter-vote, that they are not teachable and, in fact, often want to hide their own incapacity for the ministry under a pretext of godliness.

5 My books on preaching contain (as follows) examples of such preaching analyses: *God vir ons* (1994); *Die uitwissing van God op die kansel* (1996); *Die uitwysing van God op die kansel* (1998) and *Die genade van geboorsaamheid* (2000).

2.3.3 THE VOICE AS A DYNAMIC PHENOMENON

We can, therefore, make preaching-analytical comments on the disintegration of the voices. The counter-voices, or homiletical polyphony (and sometimes cacophony), can be identified on certain points. Can we come to positive conclusions concerning the content for a process of preparing a sermon in which the voices are congruent? Firstly, a general comment: homiletical books could naturally be written entirely on each of these voices. In the following chapters, I shall try to discuss each of these voices in greater detail:

- Chapter 3: The living voice of the Gospel: When God, as the present One, speaks
- Chapter 4: The living voice of the Gospel: When the Scriptures speak
- Chapter 5: The living voice of the Gospel: When the congregation speaks
- Chapter 6: The living voice of the Gospel: When the preacher speaks.

Hopefully, a *better understanding of the various roles and functions* of the voices could already serve their theological integration. In addition, I shall accompany the reader at the end of each chapter on a sermon-analytical tour, in order to demonstrate the *theological disintegration* of the voices. Each chapter concludes with an example of a sermon, illustrating alternatively the function of the four voices: of God, the text, the congregation and the preacher.

How should we understand the relationship between these four voices? Allow me to whet your appetite for the rest of this book:

By “the theological integration of the voices” I do not mean that they should be brought, more or less, into equilibrium, or that they always necessarily should have the same weight. The amalgamation of the voices is not like a *chemical mixture* to which the ingredients are added in exact equal measures or weights. The voices are not inanimate materials, but *living phenomena that imply mutual relations*.

I have made a purposeful choice for the concept of *voice* that, in my opinion, has not yet been researched adequately in view of homiletics.⁶ A

6 A wide semantic field arises around the Afrikaans word stem (voice), with concepts such as: instemming (concurrence), eenstemmigheid (unanimity), stemreg (the right to vote), stemloos (voiceless), buite stemming bly (refrain from voting), om stemming te skep (to create an atmosphere), stemmingsvol (full of atmosphere), stemmig (subdued), etc. These concepts all underline the fact that the voice is a living phenomenon – more than words or concepts on paper.

voice contains a personal element; the speaker expresses his/her identity (cf Möller 1996:33-36). In fact, one could even say that if one does not hear another person's voice, true *communication with the person*, usually,⁷ is impossible. For example, reading a letter is not the same as personally meeting the writer when you can hear his/her voice.

In respect of preaching, this means: the *preacher's* voice mediates something of his/her personality and, hopefully, of the encounter that he/she, as a person, had with God. Thus, it echoes something of the fact that the preacher has heard *God's voice*, because he/she has experienced something of God's Person. But, where does the preacher hear God's voice? In the *scriptural text*. However, this means more than merely receiving exegetical, historical or linguistic information. The scriptural text intends to give voice to God's living voice, and this leads to an encounter with Him, as a Person. Luther calls God's voice in the scriptural text the *viva vox evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel (cf Meuser 1983:55). As a preacher, as a person, this voice must address you in a dynamic living encounter, so that you now attain a voice with which to speak. The biblical text is God's living voice that has been recorded in the Scriptures, a voice heard in the dialogue between God and his people. One must, as it were, frequently rediscover, frequently tune into this living voice (cf Van der Velden 1989:126). Therefore, exegetical, historical and linguistic work on the text may never be a purpose in itself, but rather a way in which one keeps one's ear close to the text, until the living, but hidden, voice in the Scriptures can be heard anew, and one can thus meet God. Said with respect, preaching is like the dog in the advertisement listening with a cocked ear to the gramophone, until it hears "His Master's voice." Through the crackling from a historical distance, one recognizes the living Master's voice. In short, no preacher may preach without having experienced such an encounter with God in the text (Iwand 1964:19). No preacher "comes of age" without hearing life-giving words from God's mouth.

But, the *congregation* also has a (unique) voice, to which the preacher must learn to listen truly and attentively. To merely collect a number of statistical data about a congregation is not synonymous to hearing the congregation's living voice resounding in its particular context. In fact, too many preachers never hear the congregation's specific voice and, therefore, speak past the congregation and are too quick with ready answers. No resonance, no harmony of voices takes place, because there has not been a living encounter. If such an encounter between the preacher and congrega-

7 This does not exclude, for instance, deaf people from true communication. However, the rule is that the component, audio-, forms one of the basic points of departure in normal human communication.



tion has not taken place, speaking with one voice is further obstructed: then the preacher cannot echo the voice of the text as God's voice.

After all, the aim of joining *all* the voices is that *God's voice* should be heard. This "last" voice is not the least, but the carrying power, the point of integration of all the other voices. This voice gives the preacher, the text and the congregation the right to a voice (Afrikaans: *stem-reg*). Without this voice the preaching is voiceless, or perhaps just good theatre.

Recently, during an interview with Dali Tambo,⁸ Athol Fugard pointed out that a theatre production can become a "life-changing experience" if three components, the message of the script, the passion of the actor(s) and the willingness of the audience to join in, are present and if there is a happy synergy among them. In respect of the theatre, this is a fact. However, preaching is about more. A fourth factor, i.e. *the mystery of God's voice*, is added. This actually makes preaching unique.

Preaching communicates more than mere *information* about God to others; it is the *performance* of God's voice, through historical distances, the mists of incomprehension and deafness of ears. Yes, "*He, who has ears to hear, let him hear*" (Lk 8:8)! A sermon is much more than the transfer of religious information, also much more than words in a written manuscript. It rather is a word event and a Word event, the sound of a voice, non-recurrent and unique. In fact, sermons cannot be repeated, nor be re-

8 In an interview on the television programme, *People of the South*, 30 September 2001.

preached, because God's voice is not static, not fixed in time and place, but historical, contingent, living and redeeming. Sermons are more than concepts or truths on paper, no matter how exegetical or dogmatically correct they may be. They rather are a word that yearns to become a voice to articulate the Word of God's Kingdom.

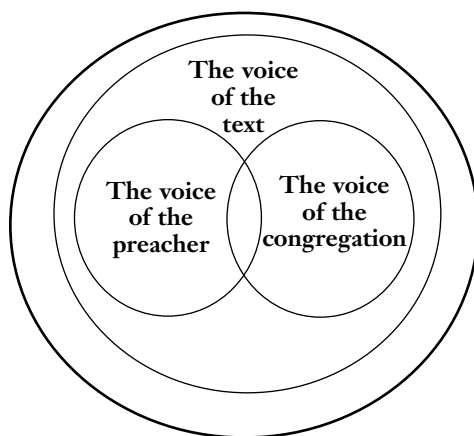
Concomitant with the concept of voice, therefore, is also the concept of *hearing* or *listening*. Preachers are people who can listen, who can hold their ears close to the right sources; people who can hear the right voices among the cacophony of voices and distinguish what really matters. They are people who keep their ears close to the ground, in the sense that they listen to the Bible, given to us as canon, but they also listen to the heartbeat of the congregation and indeed, also to the heartbeat of the world extraneous to the congregation, close to the heartbeat of the marginalized, the orphans, the widows, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, and prisoners in need, because these people hear the heartbeat of God Himself in a special way (cf Mt 25:31-46; also chapter 3). And, while the preacher's ear is held downwards to the ground, his own heartbeat must also be heard, understood, and be brought into the rhythm of God's heartbeat. Thus, he/she always holds the other ear upwards to hear the voice of the Spirit, to discern the message of the Gospel, and in order to hear and discern the voices coming from the ground (the text, congregation, world and preacher's heart) as part and parcel of the workings of the Gospel.

In the light of all this, I could perhaps risk my definition of preaching:

*Preaching takes place when God's voice is heard through the voice of the text, in the voice of the time (congregational context), through the (unique) voice of the preacher. When these four voices become one voice, then the sermon is indeed *viva vox evangelii*.*

Allow me to suggest the following schematic illustration to add to the risk of this "definition": this illustration indeed implies a dynamic relation, a discourse, but also priorities. God's voice initiates the dialogue. As the living God, He takes the initiative and speaks through the text. But, His voice does not become audible without the dialogue between the preacher, text and congregation and, ultimately, the dialogue with Him.

THE VOICE OF GOD



2.4 Preaching as play

Let us shift gears for a moment. I would also like to describe the dynamics of the relationship between these four voices in a different manner by making use of the concept of *play* (also discussed in chapter 6). In my opinion, preaching is largely about creativity and play, imagination and art. As a component of Practical Theology, preaching is an aesthetical act (cf Bohren 1975:90; Louw 2001:91; Cilliers 1998:31-50, 1994a:583-588).

I deliberately use the term *play*. Of course, in theology this is not new. The Scriptures already speak of wisdom that played like a child before the Father at the eve of creation (Prov 8:30). Many philosophers, such as Hieronymus, Origenes, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus and other mystical theologians, represented a theology that functioned as opposition to the official onto-theological tradition of their times. These often-underestimated movements contained a passion to rediscover the human being as *homo ludens*, as a playing and playful creature that is a co-worker in the Kingdom of God in unity with the playing and playful God Himself (*deus ludens*).

Indeed, the most profound motive for the metaphor of play resides in the fact that God Himself is the playful One. This is evident in His creational and recreational deeds. God created the world for His own pleasure; therefore, as his creatures, our highest calling is to glorify and enjoy Him forever (the Catechism of Westminster, 1647). Our lives are less about “success” than about the infinite freedom that we receive to participate in the infinite joy of the Creator, and thank Him also in preaching! The coming of Christ emphasized this image of the playful God. His act of salvation was not so much an emergency measure to restore the old

game of creation, as it was a move to create a new game. Jesus suffered so that we may laugh again. His cross, although no joke, makes a more profound joy, a new game with God possible. At the cross, it seems as though all joy has vanished, but:

Easter is an altogether different matter. Here indeed begins the laughter of the redeemed, the dancing of the liberated and the creative game of new, concrete concomitants of the liberty which has been opened for us, even if we still live under conditions with little cause for rejoicing (Moltmann 1971:50).

In playing, we also learn to deal with the incongruence of life (cf Theron 1996:212; as well as his literature on the *theology of humour*). In fact, Christian play is rooted in the belief in the greatest incongruence of all: *Christ, the crucified, is the King*. We are probably far too serious, far too joyless in our search for truth and meaning. Our incapability to play reveals our disbelief in the work of the Spirit. We do not trust Him to open up new, unknown mysteries to us. We are spoilsports – contrary to the playful God’s intention. Our sermons are so boring, probably also for this very reason.

2.4.1 BORDERS OF THE PLAYGROUND

To preach is to play. Bohren (1971:372) speaks of *holy play*, a play with possibilities, with words, with the Word, with the congregation, with life, with experiences, opportunities – in fact with everything that crosses preachers’ paths. Those, who distance themselves from this play, are homiletical clowns.

In order to play, one needs a playground. In my opinion, the space within which the preacher may play with a variety of possibilities is exactly the four basic constituents⁹ that we have discussed so far, namely the Biblical text, the preacher, the congregation and the One who is proclaimed: the living, playful God. This playground does not limit one, and may never become a rigid, separate entity in our methodology. The breathtaking richness of the Gospel can be seen and the polyphonic voice of the Spirit can be heard only within the interchange, the play, yes, the *interplay* between these four “beacons” or “flagpoles” (cf Bohren 1971:79).

9 I am convinced that no homiletic or theology can function without certain “norms” or “beacons” or “truths”. There does exist something like a “minimally articulated narrative of faith – a minimally dogmatic statement of what the specific contents of anybody’s world view needs to be.” (Anderson 1995:204) I however understand this framework, not in a minimalistic sense, but from a perspective of opportunity and enrichment – in which maximum creativity can be fostered.

- The first flag that we see flying is indeed the mystery of *God Himself*. As already indicated, by this I do not mean that God is but one factor amongst others, but rather that He is the foundation, the all-inclusive source of the game. God is the *Creator par excellence*, the creative One, the *deus ludens* who invites us to become creative with Him, play with Him in a trail of rich perspectives. Therefore, we also call upon His Spirit: the Spirit – *Veni Creator Spiritus* – that works in and through the biblical text, the congregation and the preacher.¹⁰ The Spirit is the One who initiates and nurtures the flow of the game, who liberates us time and again from our cramped homiletical corners and hiding places. He is the One who deters our tendency to allow the game to stagnate, who calls us when we cling for dear life to only one of the flagpoles, while the playground lies open and the game beckons. There are indeed many spoilsports. Whether it is fundamentalism with its stereotype view of the biblical text and the truth, or the extreme contextualism of postmodernism with its aimless wanderings in a labyrinth (cf chapter 6), the Spirit remains the One who continues to create the game and kindle the imagination, continues to call on us to re-imagine perspectives that we thought could reveal nothing new. The Spirit perpetually creates new spaces, new inspiration, new perspectives that carry us safely between the Scylla of fundamentalism and the Charibdis of contextualism, through the homiletical claustrophobia in which we so easily lose our sense of direction. And He always leads us between the beacons, lighthouses and flying flags that He Himself provided exactly for this purpose. (For a detailed discussion of the role of *God's voice* in preaching, cf chapter 3.)
- The second flying flag is the biblical *text*. This text does not provide us with, for example, one eternal truth, as modernism wanted us to believe for many decades, but rather a multidimensional panorama of possibilities. It continually invites us to view something of God's face from a different perspective, but it is indeed only a part, only one side of His face, only one of His many faces. Biblical texts do not contain only one essential truth that must be extracted through historical, linguistic and

10 In his book, *Praktische Theologie als theologische Ästhetik* (1975:35 a.f.) Rudolf Bohren develops his Practical Theological framework explicitly within the horizon of the pneumatology. According to him the Spirit is the One who grants freedom in methodology, who clothes the human element with dignity in the theonomic reciprocity between God and humans. The Spirit is by definition the incorporating One, and this makes a holistic (Trinitarian) perspective on theology possible (67; cf also Cilliers 1994b: 251-255; further chapter 6).

exegetical methods¹¹ as though with a pair of pliers, but rather offers a playful variety, all of them breathtaking enough to exceed your highest thoughts and noblest prayers (cf Eph 3:20). Biblical texts open new worlds and invite us, together with readers of all ages and places, to celebrate the wonderful variety of God's actions and to experience the change of being surprised by joy. Biblical texts may never be "flattened out" to suit our pre-conceived (premodern, modern, postmodern) world-view. Those who adapt the text in this way (Brueggemann 1989:7 describes this as "*reduced, trivialized and domesticated*") do not understand the nature of the text and will misuse it ultimately in serving some or other ideology.¹² Theology, in the footsteps of the biblical text, may never become a neatly packaged but closed system. Van Ruler (1969:16) says that to be a theologian is to dance. In its most profound essence, theology is always disparate; it draws its life from alternatives. In syncretism, on the contrary, you always experience a smothering of freedom. You can only inhale freely; can only play before and with God, if you experience the fresh air of contradictions. Those who want to smooth down all the "irregularities" in the biblical text and theology, cannot dance. Those who want to sort out all and sundry cannot laugh. Those, who want to solve every mystery, want to rationalize every contradiction, who ultimately want to "explain" the scandal of the Gospel, do not understand God's game. In a (modernistic) grip on things in all of these efforts, the spirit of heresy is prevalent (Van Ruler 1969:39; for the role of the biblical text in preaching, cf chapter 4).

- But does this emphasis on the variety of perspectives not culminate in full-blown relativism? Not necessarily. Why not? Because there is another flag flapping in the wind at another corner of the playground, namely the *congregation*, and especially the ecumenical church. Sermons do not belong to ministers but to the *communio sanctorum*. By this, I not only envisage the congregation in its width but also in its depth, a congregation reaching across the boundaries of denominations, space and time. The Spirit has

11 The multidimensionality of texts also implies that we should remain constantly suspicious about our exegetical and hermeneutical methods. This, however, does not mean that we may not make use of a specific method – we of course cannot operate without methods – but that we shall consciously do so, well knowing that each and every method functions with certain prejudices. The point is: we should guard that our methodology does not curtail the multidimensionality of the scriptures from the outset (cf. Deist 1988:53).

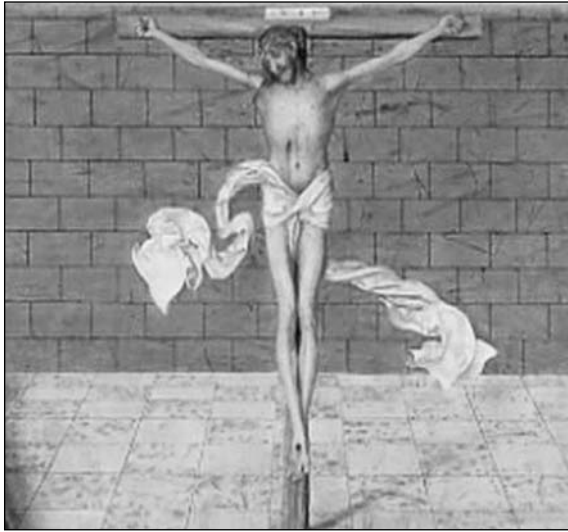
12 A good (bad!) example is the way in which the Dutch Reformed Church made use of Scripture during the Apartheid era. Texts were stereotyped to sustain the ideology of nationalism. In sermon after sermon one always finds – independent of what text was used in preaching – the same structure of the projection of guilt, analogy and moralism (Cf. Cilliers 1994c). Moralism as such probably is the most common form of stereotyping found across all denominational borders (cf. Cilliers 1996:16).

been given to the church and, in the dialogue with the church, one can find the truth (its specific angle) for the here and now. In the *ecclesial discourse* (cf Cilliers 1992:383–390), God’s specific face can be discerned as it turns towards a specific situation in time. The point is: preachers will have to relearn the art of listening to congregational voices, to be critical especially when there is only one audible exclusive voice. In the light of a congregation’s many voices, preachers need to examine themselves and find their place playfully in the bigger picture, with the prayer and hope that the truth of the Gospel will indeed be heard and obeyed in the congregation’s many voices. Saint Augustine reminded us: when we stop using God (as a religious backup in case of an emergency) and start to enjoy Him, then we shall be free also to enjoy one another in God (*fruito Dei et se invicem Deo*). God’s game that includes the homiletical game, is always a *congregational game* (cf also chapter 5).

- However, there is yet another corner flag on the preacher’s playground – the preacher him-/herself. Preachers are not mere bloodless “channels” that must “mediate” the transcendental. Neither are they the keys that literally unlock all mysteries in preaching. *Rather, preachers are creative people who witness within the space of a creative community, in the light of a creative text, about the creative God.* Therefore, they are continually inspired, but also reminded, of their place within the network of the community. For this reason, they must learn to appreciate contradictions to their own views, to allow apparent irreconcilable perspectives, to laugh when nothing fits neatly into their schemes. And they must continue playing the game even if it means that they are continually stripped of their most beloved stereotypes and even interpretative power, notwithstanding their homiletical ego being wounded or blown out of the game. To preach is to be a poet, to participate in the game of *poiesis*, to conquer your passion for (cognitive) superiority. To preach not only is a search for meaning, but also, and especially, a celebration of it. After all, poetry is a carnival of possibilities, in which other worlds and options can be considered with imagination. It is play without premature censure; play that dreams of a different, transformed world, play that indeed dreams and imagines the contemporary world in a new direction with better possibilities. Poetic preaching reminds us that history has not yet ended, that situations can be changed. It is preaching of that which is possible for God, even though it may now seem impossible. (Cf chapter 6 for the role of the preacher in preaching.)

The next chapter begins with the *creative and playful process of listening*, fundamental to this book, by primarily observing closely if and how God’s voice can be heard in preaching, and how this listening not only affects our ears but also our eyes, so that *our ears indeed become eyes that see God in a new way*.

The living voice of the gospel: When God, the present One, speaks



In this chapter we note:

- The indispensable presence of God in preaching and the worship service, and how it moves us
- The miracle of God's presence and that He speaks to us
- The good news that God's Words are always the Gospel, i.e. His salvific act
- The objective of all preaching: that hearing also becomes seeing, i.e. that the presence of God in faith is perceptible, and
- Examples of sermons describing how this Gospel of the present and speaking God is transformed into moralism.

3.1 Introduction: Why do we go to church?

Why do we go to church? What do we hope to experience or receive there? Fjodor Dostoevsky's moving account of one of *his* first experiences, as a child, in a worship service follows:

Even before I learnt to read, before I was eight years old, I had a spiritual experience. On the Monday of the Passion week, my mother brought only myself (I don't know where my brother was) to the Holy Communion. It was a fine day, and I recall, as though I can still see it, how the incense gently rose from the incense burner. From above, through the narrow window of the dome, the light of God shone in, and the rising incense merged with the sunshine. A holy experience entered me and, for the first time, I purposely assimilated the Word of God. A boy, carrying a big Book, walked to the middle of the church, and the Book was so large that, to me, it seemed he had difficulty in carrying it. He placed it on the cathedra, opened it and started to read. Suddenly, I understood something of it and, for the first time in my life, I understood that reading from the Book took place in the church (freely translated from Die Brüder Karamasoff 1959:584.)

Why do we go to church? One certainly could answer this question in many ways. For example, AA van Ruler wrote a book (*Waarom zou ik naar de kerk gaan?*) in which he lists no less than 21 reasons why it, indeed, still is worthwhile to go to church, while there could also be many reasons not to go to church! In fact, Van Ruler (1972:170) says that people who do not go to church probably would have liked to provide his book with another title, viz *Why I do not go to church* ... because they argue:

Does it make me a better person? Does it make me wiser? Do I receive something there? Does it have any meaning? What they say in church is after all sentimental nonsense. In fact they say nothing to me! ... Honestly, such a church service is boring! ... The church only keeps the people stupid! Do you truly think that I could or would want to believe all the fairy tales and myths that are told in the church? ... Furthermore, all the people sitting in the church appear to be much too hypocritical... (freely translated).

Etcetera. Yes, indeed it is a miracle that so many people still turn up in church Sunday after Sunday. There are so many enticing alternatives. After all, after a busy week or a late Saturday night, the temptation to sleep late, or to enjoy the beautiful weather on a Sunday during a round of golf or a few hours of gardening, or just relaxing with a cup of coffee and the

Sunday paper, is no illusion! Now, how do you choose between this and a typical hour in church ...?

And, should people indeed, for once, come to church, they often do so with dubious motives: out of habit (and superstition), because of feelings of guilt, parental pressure, or a vague feeling that you must bring up your children “properly,” etc. Naturally, people also go to church with other motives, for example, gratitude, loyalty, faith, a commitment to the Lord

Why do people go to church? Or, why *should* they go to church? Added to all the possible answers – correct or incorrect – there is a more profound answer, an answer that not only touches the essence of the worship service, but also the very essence of our existence. It is, as it were, the “structure” behind all other structures. The *core structure*. The *fundamental characteristic* of the worship service. It is the deepest theological perspective on all the structures, components or moments of the liturgy. Before you make adaptations to the liturgical components or orders, you must first understand something of this core structure, otherwise your adaptations can be nothing but a superficial rearrangement, a shifting of chairs on the deck of a sinking ship, to create the illusion that you have renewed radically – while you actually have missed the crux that is truly at issue.

What am I speaking about? It can be verbalized in many ways. The Reformed justifiably call this core moment: *an encounter with God*. This is when our incense mixes with God’s light, and the Book interprets this encounter. When your restless heart finds rest in God (Augustine). When you find the highest purpose and meaning of your existence, i.e. to be brought into the mystery of Him, whom we call *God*. For the purpose of this book I describe it as: to become conscious of the presence of the mystery of God, to kneel before this *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.

That is why we go to church, or should go. For *that* we yearn, consciously or unconsciously. All the elements of the liturgy, thus also preaching, deal with that, or should deal with that: i.e. to be led anew into the presence of God’s mystery, to worship Him with awe ... as God. Naturally, there are also other important core moments in the worship service, for example, that we practise community of faith, or that we celebrate our salvation, or become equipped for our task in the world, etc. But, if this does not emanate from *this moment of mystery, this wonder of an encounter*, then it is no worship service. In fact, what could be worse than this: that God withdraws from our worship services, that He tells us what he once told the Israelites (after the episode with the golden calf, Ex 32:1-6): “If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you” (Ex 33:5b).

3.2 God's presence makes us move

God's presence is all-important. But, in what does it exist and how do you recognize it? What are the signs of His presence? I hesitate to make three comments in this respect. They are linked to *three movements* (and there are many more!) that, in my opinion, must take place where God is present. The first is:

3.2.1 FROM FAMILIARITY TO FEAR OF GOD

In God's presence (sinful) familiarity disappears, because God is *not* available for our beck and call. When people lose their sense of God's mystery in the worship service – as, in my opinion, currently happens anew – then *liturgical familiarity* follows, as it were, automatically. Then, the elements of the liturgy flow easily from one to another, joyfully and carelessly, as though the worship service is but another item on our weekly program that we must put behind us. We are never shocked into silence or led to (true) humiliation or to amazement – we muddle along, busy with our “God-talk” and our little God-fabrications. Thus, the worship service becomes so unanimous with what happens outside, becomes so adapted to the fashion, that one no longer knows whether there is any difference between church and concert, between liturgy and television, between a worship service and shopping. We no longer know with Whom we are dealing. We forget that a person cannot see God and live (Ex 33:20). Only He has eternal life; He lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). Even when He reveals Himself, He conceals Himself in darkness (Ps 18:11,12). Our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Yes, when we attend a worship service, we play with fire! One recalls the classic image of Annie Dillard:

“I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible, aware of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blindly invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children, playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning... It's madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offence, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.” (1982:40-41, *Teaching a stone to talk: Expeditions and encounters*. New York: Harper and Row)

Indeed, those who begin to understand something of the word “God,” do

not rush in where angels fear to tread. Familiarity makes room for trepidation, yes, for fear of the Lord, for fear of God, which is different than fear of humans. It is not a negative fear, but a positive, a respectful acknowledgement that God is *God*. It is living in reverence for, and before, the Lord during the time of our lives as strangers in the world (1 Pet 1:17). It is an attitude to life, therefore also a *liturgical style* that must be recognized throughout our worship services: *God is present here, let us approach Him prayerfully*

The second movement is:

3.2.2 FROM FORMALISM TO FREEDOM

The correction to familiarity, however, is not formalism. In fact, it is difficult to know which of the two phenomena is the worst! God's presence is not guaranteed by stilted correctness. The intense following of tradition is no concrete sign of God's presence. On the contrary! God is greater than tradition, greater than historical phases or centuries-old liturgical formulae. There is no magical or godly power in the mere repetition of liturgical or dogmatic jewels of the past. In saying this does not mean that there is no room for it in the worship service, nor that it is crucial that we should appreciate our liturgical-historical roots and frequently return to them. Of course not! Just: tradition is no God-automat. In fact, formalism could become a useful hiding-place, a liturgical shelter against the presence of God. But, God sees right through us (Ps 139:1). Also through our religiosity.

The irony is: you can be formally correct, yet not at all free. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17). What is freedom? It is not familiarity. Freedom indeed is the liberty to approach the Lord with fear (reverence) – because He *allows* us to approach. Freedom is to praise God sincerely, to sing psalms together, songs of praise and other spiritual songs; it is to honour God by singing *with your whole heart* (Eph 5:19). There is freedom where the Spirit of the Lord is present, and where there is freedom, God must be praised heartily. This is inevitable.

Now, the third movement takes place.

3.2.3 FROM A CONSUMER MENTALITY TO EXPECTATION

Liturgy is God's work *and* it is human work – always in this sequence. Liturgy is always first God's service to us, i.e. his merciful approach to us, before we can serve Him (cf the double meaning of the German, *Gottesdienst*). God always takes the initiative: He calls us closer, He is present with us, and He transforms us. As previously stated, His presence cannot

be produced, manipulated or liturgically guaranteed. God's presence is impossible to create, not with the liturgist's "do-it-yourself" technique. After all, the burning bush (Ex 3) is not the result of *liturgical choreography* – planned and executed by humans or angels – with the purpose of making the burning-bush worship service more "Moses-friendly"! No, God appears. He reveals Himself. He comes into our midst. He is there – by His grace.

The worship service, thus, does not suit our consumer mentality: it must work and it must work for me, and I *make* it work for me. The worship service is not in our hands; it is in God's hands. And yet – this is awesome – it also is in *our* hands! We humans plan and hold worship services. Not the angels. Liturgy does not fall from heaven. The worship service is also *our* responsibility. Therefore, we must indeed do our very best to *make* it work! And we must, in any case to the best of our ability, try to eliminate all stumbling blocks on the way to the experience of God's presence. Because this experience, this "atmosphere" of God's presence can so easily be disturbed.

I speak from dire experience. I was the liturgist during a worship service in which there was something "different," something of an indescribable mystery, a true presence of God. There was a liturgical progression, a development with a climax in the closing congregational hymn. Thereafter I had to pronounce the benediction – the suitable rounding off and sending out after the worship service. Just when the congregation finished singing the hymn, one of the deacons stormed up the pulpit and handed me a note – I had to make an announcement that had been forgotten. It was something about a movie to be presented by the youth association in the church hall with special entrance fees for primary school children, popcorn and toffee-apples for sale during interval. *Terminator II*. Arnold Schwarzenegger – or was it Sylvester Stallone? Blood and thunder ...

I refused to make the announcement. Thus, the young people's fundraising was severely hampered. To this day they haven't forgiven me!

God's presence cannot be produced, but the experience thereof could indeed be hindered or obstructed by slovenly, unbelieving or insensitive liturgists. We can reveal a *liturgical style of expectation*, or wreck it. For example, two worship services could take place in exactly the same sequence, with exactly the same contents, sermon, hymns, etc. – but the one would be dead, and the other would thrill with the expectation of the Lord's presence. Why the difference? I hesitate to answer, because there could so easily be a liturgical-moralistic misunderstanding, *possibly also in the liturgist's style*. The content and formality could be exactly the same as another liturgist's, but the *manner* in which it is executed, reveals sensitivity for a greater Reality. Then, *everything* is different: your tone of voice,

your body language, your mannerisms, how you stand, how you sing – whether a song of humility or a song of praise. Everything is different. Because you *know* you are in Great Company.

My Swiss mentor, Rudolf Bohren, once told me about the day when he and his wife were sitting at their breakfast table and she looked out of the window and said: “*Rudolf, it’s going to rain.*” He paid no attention, because he would soon be working in his study, and disregarded the possibility or probability of rain. After a few hours, the sky cleared and Bohren and his wife went for their customary walk in the Odenwald. When they were about an hour away from home, the clouds gathered again and the sky became heavy, pregnant with rain. Frau Bohren looked up to the sky and repeated exactly the same words of that morning, viz: “*Rudolf, it’s going to rain.*” It was the same words, syntax and grammar. Yet, it was different. It was words filled with expectation. Words that *concerned* both Bohren and his wife.

In the worship service, we can say: “*The Lord is present here.*” Or we can say: “*The Lord is present here.*” And, between these two statements there could – literally – be a world of difference. The one could be blunt, uncommunicative, without any room for the One whose presence is announced, and the other could be open, full of hope and prayer that the One being discussed, indeed is there. The one is an announcement, and the other is a prayer.

This *liturgical style of expectation* is “open,” one in which both the liturgist and congregation are sensitive for the moment(s) in which the Lord’s clearer presence will come to the fore, open for the spaces in the liturgy that He fills in a special way, and in which the whispering of his Spirit is audible. Moments in which our eyes, as those of the two walking to Emmaus, are opened, and we recognize Him accompanying us on the (liturgical) road, and our hearts are warmed with His presence (Lk 24:31,32). Yes, there are moments when your heart is warmed in a worship service: this could be during a hymn, in a phrase of the minister’s sermon, in the experience of community with other believers, at the breaking of the bread of Holy Communion. Moments when you just *know*: we are not alone, and outsiders too then call out: “*God is really among you!*” (1 Cor 14:25).

3.3 Worship services are exciting!

From what I have said thus far, it is clear that our liturgy cannot but be *paradoxical (dialectic) by nature*. This is exciting in the true sense of the word! We may not be familiar with God, yet we are His family and go home to

Him as His children, and as each other's brothers and sisters. We must fear Him as the Lord, yet we live in the expectation that He will come into our midst, and that we may approach Him as *our* Lord. We cannot find Him in liturgical formulae, yet we have the calling to plan our worship services, to implement words, music and confessions to express our reaction to His presence.

On the one hand, His all-seeing eye is focused on us (like the one sometimes seen above old religious pictures), and this causes fear because God sees right through me, and also sees my sins. On the other hand, this causes joy because you know that He comes to you with compassion and grace. He sits with you in the worship service (as symbolized by some congregations' empty chair in the liturgical space, especially at the table for Holy Communion). In this – that God, the holy and merciful One, is present – lies the most profound miracle of a worship service.

His Book says that the light of His grace shines down and mixes with the incense of our prayers.

But, there is more to this miracle. Because: God, when present, also *speaks* to us!

3.4 The secret of preaching: That God, during his presence, speaks to us

3.4.1 THE “ACTUAL ANXIETY OF THE MINISTER OF THE WORD”

A summary of the above in a different way: theologically speaking, we do not proclaim texts, but a Person; preaching is not merely the exegesis of a number of truths, but the calling of God's Name (Bohren calls this *Namenrede*, 1971:110). Even more: the Named in the preaching Himself is *present!* *The beginning and the end, yes, the most profound secret of preaching resides in this presence of God.* Indeed, in preaching all depends on the Great I, on the triune *I am*

On the one hand, the calling of preachers is *to point out* the reality of the working God, His *praesentia realis dei* in the Word, church, sacraments and the world. On the other hand, it deals with it being ingested, the observation and experience of faith, of this reality, yes, with the congregation *seeing God* (cf Cilliers 1998:31-56; also 3.6). One can forgive preachers for many things, but not this: that they do not “mediate” something of this *theological insight*. But, who amongst us *can* mediate it?

Preachers' view of Scripture co-determines the way in which they preach (cf chapter 4). This is a fact. But, a constricted view of Scripture, without an integrated view of God, leads to Bibliolatry. We do not worship

a Book, but God, the Living God of the Book. The voice of the text is only salutary because it mediates God's voice as *viva vox evangelii*. We are ministers, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6). In that sense, we may say: *when Scripture speaks, God speaks* (Augustine). Or, in Calvin's words: In Scripture we hear the voice of the Person of the speaking God (*Dei loquentis persona*).

Thus, the most fundamental question that we can ask of preaching is: In this, is God Himself at issue? Does He Himself speak the Word? Here, precisely, lies the crux of preaching: *to speak so about God, that He Himself speaks*. But, how does one speak about God? And, how does God speak? On occasion, Karl Barth (1924:158) presented a series of lectures for ministers and, inter alia, said:

We are theologians, therefore we must speak about God. However, we are also humans and, as such, we cannot speak about God. We must know both – that we must speak about God but cannot – and, exactly because of that, pay homage to God. That is the actual anxiety of the ministers of the Word. All other things beside are child's play (freely translated).

Yes, how does a person speak about God so that He Himself speaks? What do you say when you say "God"? To this there is no logical answer, but only a theological one. Preaching is about a mystery that will be revealed because it has been revealed (cf Eph 3:3, also 6:19). This is possible only through prayer, pleading with God for bread, for a fish

In this light, the five following comments are rather exclamations of wonderment, and not intended as interpretative solutions. The reader will also notice that the five subsections are inseparable, and, in a certain sense, exactly the same issue but with light from another angle.

3.4.2 TO PREACH IS TO SAY: WHO WAS, IS AND WILL BE

God revealed Himself (epiphany), and God will reveal Himself (*parousie*). But, between what was and will be, He is too, and He is also *with us* all the days until the very end of the world (Mt 28:20). Preachers need not create this reality of bliss, but must just testify thereof, point it out in the hope and expectation that God Himself will use the sermon to confirm that He who was, also is and will be. To preach, is to be taken up in the movement of bliss, in the reality of the working God between epiphany and *parousie*, and to declare it as *true* (cf Barth 1964:67-73).

Precisely for this reason, we cannot read our biblical texts only in terms of their origin, their history. Historical and literary sciences that does not help preachers also to discover the *future of these biblical texts*, are a stum-

bling block for the proclamation of the Gospel. Bethel Müller (1973:126) writes beautifully:

The exegesis thus, must not alone cast grammatical-historical light from its context, but cast eschatological light from its entire historical horizon, pregnant with promises. The text has a "future": the exegesis must catch the nearing light of the future, of the promise in this text, and present it to humans amidst their historical threats (freely translated).

Our labour with the text must assist us to reach the *God-sense of the text* (Wilson 1995:82ff), to the discovery of the present and future reality of the One who was. Preaching of the God-sense, yes, the God-reality and God-working, as described in the text, is different principally than presenting God as a mere metaphor or a comparison, or as some or other abstract term such as truth and love, or as a rhetorical technique to manipulate the audience, or as an idea that the congregation must understand, or as a linguistic God who can exist only within the house of our language. No, God is the living God, the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8).

3.4.3 TO PREACH, IS TO REMOVE YOUR SHOES

We do not proclaim a formula such as H₂O, but the living God. Not a recipe of a scheme or a theory, but, as stated above, the Person of the speaking God. Those who wish to practise a *recipe-theology*, have trouble in understanding a *reception-theology*, to be receptive for ingesting and observing constantly something of the greatness and unintelligibility of God's mystery. Our theology and preaching is no ingenious piece of scaffolding that we put up to prop God up or to keep Him erect. He does not need scaffolding or recipes to be God. God is God. Incomprehensible. Even in his revelation He remains covered in darkness (cf Ps 18:12!). God is God. Eternal. Precisely this sometimes makes us (wrongly) so cross with, and sad about, God: we do not understand that He takes his time to do his will. We do not understand that He reveals Himself gradually as the Faithful God in the course of a long history of grace.

Those who have experienced something of the actual anxiety of a minister of the Word of which Barth spoke, i.e. feel compelled to speak of this mystery of God, but, as human beings, are unable to do so, know that one must not storm in where angels fear to tread. To preach is suddenly to find yourself beside a burning bush (Ex 3). Here we must remove the shoes from our feet and know: we are standing on holy ground. According to tradition, Augustine on occasion preached for two hours about the mystery of

God. In concluding, he called out: “*And if you want to know more about Him, then ask Him yourself!*” We can never finish speaking about God, and cannot explain Him. We can only speak about Him in prayer with closed eyes and cupped hands. *It is true, we are beggars!* (Luther on his deathbed.)

God is more than a problem, more than a question that we must solve. God is God. As God, He must be worshipped, and while being worshipped must be questioned. When I say “God,” this is a question, the most profound question of my life: Who are You, O God, what is Your Name, where are You to be found? Miskotte (1976:200) writes a moving paragraph about this most profound question:

The preacher stands there and the people are waiting for him. An awesome moment! To sink through the floor. Because he may not give a lecture, nor a speech, nor tell a story. The people lift their faces and with their silent attention, pose their question. The people say – and they are quite right –: now you must understand that this is a meeting, not only of people, but of God with us. Now you also wish to hear God speak, you yourself have created the expectation, therefore you bring our most profound question to attention, the question that elsewhere is kept strictly secret, although it always worries us: the question about God, about the living God. Woe to the preacher who should ask this one question. And also: happy is the preacher who does this, because he senses the terrible and wonderful pressure of the impossible, he feels that but one thing remains: to become an instrument, a droning and comforting organ, played by God (freely translated).

Yes, as preachers we cannot but kneel with the congregation before the mystery of God with our most profound vital question, hoping that He will reveal Himself on the grounds of his revelation, and that we will be inspired to worship anew. Indeed: *Who says “God,” says worship.*

3.4.4 TO PREACH, IS TO RAISE YOUR HANDS

To say “God” in worship demands a different type of style than that of absolute certainty and unbrokenness. We do not control God with our many words about Him. God is greater than our sermons. Preaching is not control over, and of, the truth. What we inherently wish to do is: diminish God, making Him controllable and manageable. Halver (1970:13) starts one of his sermons with a moving poem that truly illustrates this tendency:

*Dear congregation,
Every Sunday morning you want me
to put a small, dear little God on your knees*

*so that you can play a little horsy-horsy with Him.
But, when you have finished playing, you put Him back into my arms
And I must do with Him as I please
until the following Sunday
and if, during the week, I go and show Him what among you is wrong
in the family, in the community, in politics,
until He becomes sick of it,
then you get cross with me and say:
you should rather have produced Him only on Sunday(freely translated)*

No, God may never, neither in preaching, become a little pet god-on-the-lap. This Mystery is simply too great to play horsy-horsy with it. Preaching rather is a deepening in the Mystery, awe over the Trinity. It is loss of control. Who knows how God will work? Who can prescribe to Him? (Cf Rom 11:33-36.) It is an open style, “open-ended” – open towards God. A style in which all your homiletical preparation and theological learning must be put on the altar, in which your sermon, like an Isaac – the only one that you love – must be abandoned repeatedly.

I repeat: in this sense, the basis and depth structure of preaching remains one of prayer. Preaching without *epiclesis* is no preaching. Those who cannot say *kyrie eleison*, cannot preach. To preach, is to stretch one’s arms to God, not only with uncertainty and brokenness, but also with the expectation that God will reveal Himself there and then so that his Mystery deepens. To preach is to stand before God, empty, open before Him, full of questions, expectation, tension – which always culminates in *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (come, Creator-Spirit)!

3.4.5 TO PREACH, IS TO GRASP THE CURTAIN

God indeed reveals Himself in preaching. His voice *can* be heard. Preaching lives in this expectation (hope), and in this hope it perseveres, sighing with patience that this now will be so (cf Rom 8:22-26). What happens in preaching is far more than mere religious talk, it is a distribution of mercy. The congregation – and the world – indeed have the right to expect exactly this of preaching; that here God’s voice will be audible via a human voice. Frederick Buechner (1977:22-23) expounds this (mostly tacit) expectation aptly in his book, *Telling the truth*:

The sermon hymn comes to a close with a somewhat unsteady “amen” and the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in his hand. His mouth is a little dry. He cut himself shaving. He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor.

In the front pews an old man turns up his hearing aid while a young mother slips her six-year-old a lifesaver and Magic Marker. A college sophomore home for vacation, there because he was dragged there, slumps forward, chin in his hands. The vice-president of the bank, who twice that week seriously contemplated suicide, places his hymnal in the rack. A pregnant teenage girl feels life stir within her body, a high school maths teacher, keeping his homosexuality a secret, creases the bulletin down the centre with his thumbnail and tucks it under his knee.

The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now the preacher may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this moment, the silence is deafening. Everyone knows the kinds of things he has told them before, but who knows what this time, out of his silence, he will tell them.

To preach, is to speak from the silence before God, from the silence from which his Word is born, because He fills the silence with Himself. To preach, is to be brought into the Most Holy of God's revelation. It is to place people before the Ark of the Covenant, to move the curtain away from the Most Holy, and to see things that you have never seen before. Good preaching, says Miskotte (1976:206-207), is "*to grab the curtain that hides the Ark*" (freely translated). This does not mean that we wish to take Christ's work from his hands. The curtain is already torn from top to bottom, down the middle (Mk 15:38). God has already removed the veil (2 Cor 3:14-18). With God there is no curtain, but with us hangs the curtain, which repeatedly must be removed in preaching, so that we can attain an insight into the Most Holy. To preach, is to move curtains away, prayerfully, but with determination, because the curtain has been moved away, yes, has been torn open. And, if the curtain has been moved away, may we ask: Congregation, do you see it now? Do you know that you are in the Most Holy? Now, He is around you, around all of us, yes, He hems us in on all sides (Ps 139:5).

3.4.6 TO PREACH, IS TO TRUST THE WORD

As preachers, this Gospel is our only consolation. We must trust this Word with our whole heart, without adding anything (Barth 1964:89). It may be *our* words that leave our mouths, but en route to the ears of the audience, the Spirit changes our words into Christ's words, yes, the living Word itself. As in the Holy Communion, a type of transsubstantiation takes place (Miskotte 1976:200): our words become the Word, the Word of Salvation, in which and through which Christ Himself hands out the fruits of his work of salvation. God is present in his Word. He rides in on the Word of

truth, says Miskotte. He answers. He, Himself, is the last Answer to the last and most profound question of our lives. Everything in preaching and, in fact, in the entire worship service, depends on God's arrival in our midst. Christ, Himself, speaks his Word; He, Himself, is the Word that brings about our salvation:

And here you see a big secret. The sound of our words reaches your ears, but the Teacher is within you. Do not think that you are merely learning something from a human being. We can admonish you by the sound of our voice. But, if Somebody, who teaches you, is not inside you, our sound will remain in vain External teachings are specific aid appliances and stimulations. But He, who teaches hearts, his pulpit is in heaven. Therefore, He, Himself, says in the Gospel: do not allow yourselves on earth to be called teachers, because after all one is your teacher, namely Christ. (Augustine; cf Van Oort 1991:26, also 1989:84).

The Word in our words! Herein lies the essence of preaching. Preaching exists of human words, yet, it is also much more than that, much more than a mere excerpt from a dictionary and combined into an approximate successful way in a speech. Preaching takes place with the faith and hope that God Himself will mix his Words into our sermon's words, so that our many words, in some or other way, could be heard as God's Word, and that He Himself will speak.

Indeed, to preach, is to speak about God so that He Himself can speak

3.5 When God speaks, we hear the Gospel of salvation

The miracle of preaching is this: God is present. He speaks to us. But, *He speaks in a specific way*. Here the miracle deepens even further, because, as God speaks, his grace is always primary. The fact that God comes to sinful people in a surprising and overwhelming way, a new and strange way and saves them – that is the Gospel. That, notwithstanding all the justification or guilt of people; He takes the initiative and recreates them for Himself – the Bible is full of this. When God's people think that they will experience his anger and that the flames are already literally rising to consume them, they hear:

Do not fear, I have saved you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze;

for I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour (Isa 42:25; 43:1-3).

Yes, even when God announces His judgement, it is (the precursor to) His grace. It is nothing but His wounded love; His anger simultaneously is His embrace of grace (Luther). Without having deserved to receive anything, we receive the salvation as it were out of the blue, directly from heaven. God withdrew His anger into Himself and poured it out onto His Son. You hear it in the groaning in His inner being, in the wrestling of His love – already in the Old Testament:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath (Hos 11:8,9).

Preachers are called, primarily and unceasingly, to witness about this unparalleled Gospel of God's grace, and to *point this out*. To call out: God is love (1 Jh 4:8). Not wrath. Thank God! To declare: God's love is here, it's a reality, it's *true*, it's for *you*. You cannot stop it, nor control it. It falls from the sky like rain, sovereign, mostly unexpectedly and unstoppable. Who can stop the drops? Who can chase the rain back to heaven? No, God lets his rain fall on the righteous *and* on the unrighteous (Mt 5:45).

This reminds one of what Thomas Merton (1977: 42) wrote about rain in another context. For him, it becomes a symbol of life, of the bounty and goodness of nature, of the safety in a greater totality:

The rain that I am listening to now is different to that which falls in the cities. It fills the forests with a mighty and majestic sound. It covers the flat roof of the house and its veranda with its continuous and controlled rhythms. And I listen, because it reminds me time and again that the world functions according to rhythms that I have not yet learned to recognize, rhythms that are not those of human engineers... No human initiated the rain, and no one is going to stop it. It will continue to speak on my roof as long as it pleases, this rain. And as long as it speaks, I will listen... (Paraphrased from: Raids on the unspeakable)

Such is grace. Free, unstoppable, all around us. And we may preach it!

To preach this grace, means preaching Christ. Nothing more, nothing

less, and nothing else. But ... it does not stand to reason that we do indeed preach Christ. Thorough exegesis and “correct” preaching does not necessarily guarantee that it happens. In fact, it could even be a stumbling block if you merely trust upon this for preaching the Gospel. *Thorough and correct is not always right*. Correct can be to have the right sheet music with the right notes before you – but this is not yet the music. The black notes on paper must become music to the ears, otherwise it is not music!

In preaching the Gospel, more happens than we could ever accomplish – the miracle of what cannot humanly be accomplished. Although this does not deprive us of our responsibility of working to the best of our ability to *prepare* the sermon.

3.5.1 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SERMON OF SALVATION

But, how could one *describe* a sermon of salvation, discussed thus far? How would you recognize it? Firstly, we must say: it is a *gift* of the Holy Spirit, and an *art* that we must be taught repeatedly. Thus, if we try to determine what *structure* preaching of salvation should adopt, then we should always remember: no recipe or prescriptions exist, but only *indications* that you mostly recognize in retrospection than determine ahead. In these sermons, there are only *signs of language* that heralded the good news of the Gospel. In my opinion, these signs of language are inseparably concomitant with, and the results of, the following six *fundamentals and characteristics* that apply for preaching about salvation.

3.5.1.1 *The crux of salvation preaching: Nothing but Christ*

God reveals Himself as the Trinity; therefore the sermon must always also be trinitarian, whether pertaining to the Old or New Testament. A basic, homiletic rule – its ABC – reads: *Preaching is always about the proclamation of the reality of the present saving God, of the works of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. But what an ABC! Rather an Alfa and Omega

We must proclaim the works of the Triune God, and we are called to proclaim Christ (cf 1 Cor 2:2: *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*). Luther also voiced his opinion strongly: *nihil nisi christus praedicandus* (proclaim nothing but Christ; cf Meuser 1983:38).

The point is: *All lines in preaching eventually converge on Christ, and all rays shine from Him*. But ... how do we proclaim *nothing but* Christ, and yet the Trinity? This is a complex question that is also linked to the question about the relation between the Old and New Testaments, but cannot

be discussed here.¹³ The following apply only as general guidelines.

One can only preach Christologically from an *integrated theological vision on the work of the Trinity*. Should the work or being of the Trinity be skewed to some or other side in the sermon, then theological deformation, as it were, follows automatically – whether docetism, spiritualism or an untenable type of Jesulogy. No, preaching is about salvation, the Gospel, it is about the good news that *God of the Old and New Covenants* mercifully redeem us to obey Him. The Gospel is not limited to the New Testament, just as the law is not limited to the Old Testament. We could indeed say that the most profound point of God's salvific work can be found in Christ, and that preaching of salvation, as revealed in all biblical texts, always, in some or other way, must penetrate to this most profound point.

The latter is especially problematic as regards preaching from the Old Testament. To preach Christocentrally, and not narrow down specific texts prematurely with a Christomonistic dogma, indeed demands theological integrity. Here, precisely *Christology* can easily be transformed into an indistinct type of *Jesulogy*, which robs the proclamation of salvation of all power. Rein Bos (1992:267-272) points out a number of potholes in this regard, impassable tracks in which the Old Testament largely disappears behind Christ, and thus is not done justice to:

- *The Christological narrowing of the Old Testament text.* In this case, the entire text is perceived to be a prophesy to be realised in Christ. Then, the preaching merely implements the Old Testament as an introduction to the “actual” message, and never has the opportunity to, as it were, speak its heart. The irony is that, the salvific message thus is deprived of its depth, and that Jesulogy suppresses the legitimate Christological possibilities of the text.
- *The Christological enlargement of the Old Testament text.* This model proclaims Jesus as the One who, in a unique manner, has fulfilled the moral of the text. The moral demand coming from biblical figures (Abraham, Moses, David, etc.) is then strengthened by the fact that Christ surpassed all of them. Once again, the irony is that Jesulogy suppresses the legitimate Christological possibilities of the text, now by the Jesulogy of moralism.
- *The Christological tearing apart of the Old Testament text.* Sometimes, preachers actually want to deliver two mini-sermons in one, i.e. from the Old and New Testaments, often with literally also two Scripture

13 For a detailed discussion, cf Holmgren, FC 1997. *The Old Testament and the significance of Jesus: Maintaining Christian identity*; and Seitz, CR 1998. *Word without end: The Old Testament as abiding theological witness*, to mention but two.

readings. Consequently, justice is done to neither of the two texts, the links between the two mini-sermons are unclear, and the transition is abrupt. Even worse: the Old and the New Covenants are torn apart.

- *The Christological punctuation of the Old Testament text.* Here, Christology is added as a kind of conclusion after each and every Old Testament text, often in a stereotype way. Such a conclusion must then be fitting after each sermon, with the implication: all texts ultimately but say the same thing. This truly is an attempt to confer sanction to Old Testament texts, but the irony, again, is that the wealth of possibilities, also Christological possibilities, is quelled by this predictable punctuation.

That this is no simple matter, is clear. *In a sense, it is possibly the highest art and science, the most profound secret of preaching: to proclaim nothing but Christ, but then still within the wealth of the biblical text, and from an integrated, trinitarian theology.* Our calling is to proclaim Christ – this remains my point of departure in this book, as symbolized also in Cranach's painting on the cover. After all, the crucifixion and resurrection are the core, the "most important" hinge on which the entire Gospel revolves (cf 1 Cor 15:3-8).

3.5.1.2 Preaching of salvation is a word about God ...

Preaching about salvation is always primary – as stated above – the good, surprising news of the *acts of God*. Therefore, we must always question our use of language in preaching from this conviction: *what* does it say about God? And also: *how* does the sermon speak about God? Preaching must always remain *theological* by nature, i.e. always say a word about God and his acts. Because, preaching always is about the acts of God, we always hear something new, something never heard before, even if it is the old, old message. Again and again, we receive a new perspective on the unspeakable grace of God. In preaching the Gospel, we are always surprised by a new joy, always in awe of a new hope, while we thought no such sensation exists any longer

Preaching that does not have this effect, that does not spell out the immensity of our being saved from sin to gratitude, degenerates into *humanism*. We become introverted – instead of bringing ourselves to the confession: God is working, He has worked, He will work and He works *now*. He is present as a Reality. The unsurpassable Worker. His kingdom has come, will come, and comes even now. Who can stop the blessing of his rain?

No, we cannot, *need not* take God's work out of his hands

Often, our words, our grammar, betray that, profoundly, we do not understand the reality of God's presence. That we, said with respect, want to help the Lord a little or come to his rescue. This reveals our theology, or the lack thereof. Sometimes it seems or sounds as though we speak about God but, actually, we are speaking about ourselves (cf 3.7 for extensive examples of this).

No, God's grace precedes everything. Indeed, the doctrine of predestination is the sum-total of the Gospel (Barth), thus the primary theological basis of preaching the Gospel. The following meditation underlines this:

The pre-grace of God. A grace that precedes my faith and my unfaith, my prayers and my prayerlessness, my piety and my unholiness, my repentance and my lack of repentance.

*What is human life? A snippet of time received on your timeline between your date of birth and date of death: 70 years, or 80 if you are very strong (Ps 90:10). And, between your birth and your death, you experience your quota of sweet and bitter, your joy and grief, your heartache and hope. And, through the grace of God, eternity might cross this little piece of your timeline and you may make a decision for the Lord – an event, the meaning of which indeed will become fully clear to you only in eternity, and for which eternity will be far too short in which to thank God enough. This is so. But, it would be a fatal mistake if we started to think that our salvation is born for us only in this decisive moment, that it depends entirely on our decision. You did not choose me, but I chose you, Jesus once said to his disciples (Jh 15:16). Our salvation is born in God's decision, is entirely dependent on God's decision, on his pre-grace ... when we were still powerless, when we were still godless, when we were still sinners. God says: Before you were born, I already dreamt of you (translated and adapted from Cilliers, Johan: *In die greep van God*.1991).*

One of the greatest riddles, no, tragedies, probably is still the fact that we can resist this irresistible grace of God – no matter how inconceivable this may sound. Our natural tendency is to seek our own righteousness – “*I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,*” declares the Pharisee and, thus, deprives himself of true righteousness (Lk 18:11,12). Our original sin still remains our blatant, but mostly refined pride (Augustine). We are masters in subtle, but fatal shifts: what God ordained we change into what we possess; what God decides becomes what we achieve; what is a free gift of God becomes nice people with wealth or power; what is God's pre-grace becomes people's achieved grace.

But, there is *no* substitute for the Gospel of grace

3.5.1.3 ... and a Word of God

However, preaching salvation is always more than a mere word *about* God, it is also a word *from* God; more than mere *information* on salvation, rather an *event* of salvation itself; more than a mere *declaration*, rather *redemption*. After all, the Gospel always does what it says, accomplishes what it puts in words. The biblical text is not merely *informative*, but also *performative*: as God's Word, it does not return to Him empty, but accomplishes what He desires and achieves the purpose for which He sent it (cf Isa 55:11). The Hebrew meaning of "word" (*dabar*) does not indicate merely "something," but itself is an event, a salvific event. In the Word, God Himself comes to us. He, Himself, is the Word, the Word of Creation and Re-creation, who not alone created all that exists, but also resurrects the dead (Jh 1:1-3; Rom 4:17). The preaching of *this* Word also constitutes the *church* (as a *creatura verbi*), and we are *transformed* into new people.

Therefore, as already emphasized, we do not preach, primarily, mere words or a "message" or even a text, but a Person: Jesus Christ Himself. Where *He* is proclaimed, is confirmed that this hour, this *kairos* stands under the sovereignty of the Word. Preaching is the confirmation that the time, this time with its needs and pain, takes place before God's face, He supports it, and He bears with it to *his* future. Therefore, the preaching of the Gospel is not merely a general truth, a pedagogic doctrine, a historical announcement, a psychological philosophy, or a social program, but the exclamation mark over Christ's Sovereignty over the entire reality.

When we deal with the Word and also wrestle with it in preaching, this remains our consolation and our challenge: that the Word is an effective Word (Luther: *verbum efficax*). The Gospel is filled with promise made true by God, also in preaching. This, indeed, is the be all and end all in preaching.

The fact that God Himself realizes the promises of his Word in preaching, has far-reaching implications for the *manner in which we speak about salvation* or rather: in which the salvation (the Saviour) comes at issue in our words. Preaching that is redemption is always *directed towards the present time*. It tells not only the story of a diminished history of grace or imparts not only metaphysical information or does not present psychological interpretations of human problems. It is more than a testimony of salvation, rather a current event of grace, as it manifests in this specific preaching of the Word. The Word, and its preaching, makes history, creates time, *salvific* time. *I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation* (2 Cor 6:2b).

Therefore, preaching about salvation also always has a route *to a specific address*. Preaching that is redemption, is more than general truths that

could be transmitted to anybody, contains more than mere theological doctrinal contents, Christian world perspectives or biblical anthropologies – notwithstanding how important and educational these may be. Preaching that is redemption, speaks to specific people, in such a way that the One who exonerates them can liberate them from sin, i.e. from *themselves*. However, it also addresses the *circumstances and structures* in which particular people find themselves. For example, you cannot preach the Gospel in exactly the same way during the Second World War as in the year 2003. Because the Gospel “fits in” with the time, place and circumstance as an old, old message, yes, but as the *good news for the here and now* (cf chapter 5 for more on this).

Actually, one never knows beforehand *what* will happen in a sermon, because the *Who* that happens in it, has a free hand. He acts how, where and when He wishes. Therefore, preachers must remain *sensitive* for the (sometimes strange) working of the Word in the worship service. The latter, after all, is more than a neatly, pre-worked out programme that must run faultlessly from A to Z. Naturally, we must prepare to the best of our ability, but, simultaneously, must also know: the Lord is not restricted to sermons or programmes. Sometimes, there are totally unexpected dimensions in a worship service, expansions of your thoughts and experience that take your breath away. Then, it is important that the minister takes note of this movement, is sensitive for a certain atmosphere, and can “improvise.” But no, this is no alibi for liturgical and homiletical laziness, untidiness or fickleness, rather openness to *liturgical and homiletical hope*.

In preaching, we are not busy with playing games or with entertainment, but with life and death. Therefore, we should listen to preaching with the *expectation* that God, who called us from death to life, will do this again in the moment of preaching. We may enter the pulpit in the hope that we shall have an encounter with none other *than the Living God Himself*, yes, that the Person of the speaking God Himself will approach us during, and in, the words of the sermon. And the congregation must sense something of this expectation, the spark, the hope: here, something will happen to us in our specific circumstances. Here, embers that can give life leap from the minister’s words, and there is a power that could make the paralyzed arise.

This reminds one of the Rabbinical story of the paralyzed man who once described his hero, *Baal Sjem Tov*. He was illustrating enthusiastically how his hero always jumped around and danced when he prayed very earnestly, when he himself suddenly arose from his wheelchair and, precisely according to his own words regarding his hero, began jumping around and dancing! *His words became true in, and for, himself*. As from that moment, his paralysis was cured. Hereby I do not necessarily recommend liturgical

dances or ritual jumping around, but an attitude, *a style of expectation*. The Word in our midst is the Living Word. He works. How can we remain seated in our wheelchairs when we preach about, and listen to, Him?

3.5.1.4 Preaching about salvation is the telling and retelling of a story ...

Salvation became present in history, therefore it can also be made present in the preaching of histories. *The narrative has an evangelical dimension* (Josuttis). However, people often have different perceptions of the concept “narrative preaching”.¹⁴

- *Firstly*, the mere telling of “stories” in sermons, often for effect, or just because it is a “good story.” Then the story becomes an objective in itself, and the biblical text is understood merely as an accessory, as a kind of exegetical confirmation of the value of the story’s truth. Stories have the capacity to carry one away. Especially stories that impart a negative sentiment could ultimately totally dominate the sermon and the biblical text (cf 3.7 for examples).
- The *second level* of narrative preaching is the contemporary retelling of biblical stories, in such a way that the general drift of the story could still be followed, despite the difference in historical data. Thus, you can clearly recognize the biblical story in the contemporary “expansion” or retelling of it.

For example, Philip Yancey (in: *What’s so amazing about grace?*), the American journalist-theologian relates some of Jesus’ parables in a very contemporary manner, based on true, current events such as this one, that invites you to preach about the parable of the big wedding celebration!

An engaged couple went to the exclusive Hyatt Hotel in Boston to make arrangements for their wedding reception. However, both had expensive tastes and chose only the best: the most superb menu, the most imposing silverware, the most beautiful flower arrangements. The

14 For example, John McClure (1991:25-27) refers to narrative hermeneutics (when the word “narrative” is used in regard to biblical material in preaching), narrative semantics (linked to the form of sermon), narrative enculturation (referring to culture and human experiences) and narrative world view (specifically the theological world view or story of faith). Lucy Rose (1997:1-11) also maintains four distinctions: narrative with regard to the purpose of preaching, biblical hermeneutics, the language of preaching, and the arrangement of preaching material. Eugene Lowry (1995:342) refers to three levels: narrative homiletics, narrative hermeneutics and narrative theology.

account was \$13 000. They paid half as a deposit and left to order wedding invitations.

On the day that the invitations were to be mailed, the bridegroom changed his mind and wanted to cancel the wedding. His angry but heart-broken fiancée went to the Hyatt Hotel to cancel the reception. To her dismay she heard that only a small amount of the deposit would be refunded. She had two options: either to lose the money or to proceed with the arrangements.

The bride then got the hare-brained idea to go ahead with the reception – not as a wedding banquet, but just for a huge festivity. The reason? Perhaps it was because the bride had been a resident of a shelter for homeless people. However, she later found her feet and employment and, in time, saved a considerable sum of money. Now, she decided to send official invitations to all the homeless in Boston's shelters for an unforgettable evening.

So, one warm summer evening in June 1990, a reception in the exclusive Hyatt Hotel took place as the personnel had never experienced. People from all over arrived: shabby old people on crutches or with walkers, people whose possessions could fit into a supermarket trolley, beggars accustomed to sleeping under cardboard, addicts – their hard life obvious in their faces. They sat at the tables with crisp white linen and polished silverware, were served by waiters in dress suits, feasted on a five-course meal, prepared by some of the world's best chefs. As the evening progressed, they drank champagne, ate the wedding cake and enjoyed a symphony orchestra's soothing music. A glaring contrast between underserving cases on the one hand and luxurious festivities on the other, as never seen before!

Except ... in the Gospel.

Observe carefully: the Host walks between the tables.

His smile says it all (paraphrased).

In this, does one not hear the good news of the Gospel in a striking way?

- The *third level* of narrative preaching is the telling of a contemporary story that, evidently, does not follow the drift of any biblical story, but nevertheless expresses and illustrates the theological core of a specific text or the general biblical message. If you are sensitive enough for it, you can find this type of story virtually all over. For example, Dostoevsky's works are full of such jewels, also those of Victor Hugo.

Victor Hugo's novel, *Les misérables*, portrays the moving story of a Frenchman, Jean Valjean, who received a 19-year jail sentence because he had stolen a piece of bread. In jail, he gradually became a hardened

criminal. In fisticuffs he was unbeaten. Nobody could break his will. Eventually he was released, but, because in those days criminals had to carry special identity cards, no innkeeper dared to give this dangerous man a room. He wandered through the streets of the town for four days trying to find shelter against the elements, until a compassionate bishop took pity on him.

That night, Jean Valjean lay quietly in his bed waiting until the bishop and his sister were asleep. He arose, found the family's precious silverware in the kitchen and escaped.

The next morning three policemen knocked on the bishop's front door. Behind them stood Valjean in handcuffs. They had caught him redhanded while fleeing with the family's precious silverware. Now they wanted this to be confirmed before they put him in chains for the rest of his life. The bishop's reaction pulled the rug from under all their feet, especially those of Jean Valjean.

"So, here you are," he said while looking him in the eyes. "I'm so glad to see you. Did you then forget that I also gave you the candelabra? They are also silver like the rest, and probably worth 200 franc. Did you forget to take them with you?"

The criminal's wide eyes stared at the bishop and his face had an expression impossible to describe.

"This man is no thief," said the bishop to the police. "The silverware was my gift to him."

When the police had left, the bishop gave the candelabra to his guest, who was now standing speechless and quaking before him. *"Do not forget, never forget, that you promised me that you would use the money for the silverware to make an honest man of yourself,"* said the bishop.

Now, is this not a classic story of undeserved grace, of charitable favour? Because, here the most terrible criminal is exonerated, even more, he receives wealth without his having deserved it in the least. In fact, this takes place precisely *contrary* to what he deserves, before there was even a trace of remorse from him.

The same story of undeserved grace one also finds in the Gospel, only even more awesome, because here it deals with a far greater guilt and a far greater redemption. For example, this is described in verses already called the Gospel in a nutshell: "... when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.... But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:6,8).

- The *fourth level* of narrative preaching is the specific point of departure that preaching – in whatever form – may retell nothing other than the master narrative of Jesus. This narrative remains the norm against

which all narrative elements in preaching should be judged. However, this deals with more than only narratives or stories in the general sense of the word. The master narrative of Jesus can also be retold in “dogmatic” or “teaching” sermons – on condition that they are undergirded by the narrative (history) of the salvific events in Christ, i.e. his incarnation, suffering, resurrection and triumph. For example, in Luther’s sermons virtually all “narrative streams” that flow through, can be traced back to his passion to proclaim nothing but Christ (Josuttis).

Whatever your point of departure may be, narratives may not be told with the mere rhetorical intention to create an effect or to liven up the message. The Gospel’s relating of the Jesus-narrative does not aim at *legalistic norming or ethical indoctrination*, but indeed *animation*, in the sense that, from the master narrative of Jesus, it wishes to invite and confront the listener with the life that is in Jesus. To retell the Gospel, is to “release” people from their own and other evil histories, and to “accompany them into” the Gospel’s good history/-ies. Here, the preacher must learn the art of using, in an imaginative way, *salvific images and narratives* in preaching; images and narratives that honour the theological core of the biblical text and take them further in a contemporary manner. (For a discussion of imaginative preaching, cf chapter 6.)

3.5.1.5 ... from the human mouth ...

The master narrative of Jesus must penetrate the heart of the preachers themselves, before they can retell it. In this sense, preaching is a testimony of salvation, as preachers are not impersonal “canals” through which exoneration takes place, but people who were touched by the Gospel of redemption, who, themselves, believe it and expect its working. Preachers must be *credible witnesses*. (Cf chapter 6 for a further discussion of the preacher’s role in preaching.)

The point is: those who enter the pulpit are not bloodless beings, but people with a history, mercifully also a history of *salvation*, which must also reflect in some or other way in preaching. What we say, we must believe. The ink on our sermon’s papers must become blood. However, this does not (in fact!) mean that preaching may now be permeated with the preacher’s private opinion, personal dignity or theological interests. Primarily, it is about the good news of an “objective salvific truth,” an event external to human beings (*extra nos*). However, this salvific truth is aimed at me (*pro me*) and, in preaching, such a blessed person proclaims it.

3.5.1.6 ... and the Spirit

This brings us to the sixth characteristic of the preaching of salvation: the Word that we preach is alive through the work of the *Holy Spirit*. Could we ever reiterate this enough? This remains the miracle of preaching: the Spirit uses our stammering words to verbalize God's Word. He, Himself, continuously creates in us the prayer: *Lord, please give us your words!*

It may indeed be the preachers' words that leave their mouths but, through the work of the Spirit, ultimately it is the Word of God that reaches the audience. Miskotte (1976:201) formulates poignantly:

Preaching is a fiery zeal and aims to hit the target, until God eventually directs the arrow, his Word, there in the heart, which was a burning question. Preaching is the holding open of hands in quaking expectation that God should pour living Water into them, and so, in the same hands, without spilling, to carry it to suffering people. Preaching is depositing words as so many tests, from which emits the Holy Spirit's eternal song of God's Love (freely translated).

Yes, sheet music must become live music

One can hardly define preaching other than in terms of confessions and prayers. Preaching is a bridge and a road, a door and a window, a canal and a tube through which the Spirit comes to us (Luther). Preaching is where a human being ventures and this pleases God (Barth). Preaching is to call out in awe about God's grace, and this is a campaign against the powers (Wingren), etcetera ...

But, who amongst us can preach thus?

Every time before he entered the pulpit, Spurgeon prayed: *O Holy Spirit, please take over, apply the truth of the Gospel, make us alive!* Now, one starts to understand this.

Those who have already preached, will know that they cannot enter the pulpit without (such a) prayer. Anybody who has already experienced something of the wonder of being allowed to preach, will inevitably feel that that they have never really done it. But, they will persist in trying, continue hoping – until, through God's grace, they will indeed some day truly preach, be it but once.

After all, the Spirit was given to us also for this – so that we may preach. He makes all the difference. He transforms preaching into a hopeful action, an event in which the Gospel's hopeful promises are realized by the Spirit of God Himself. Yes, herein resides our hope: that God Himself deals and will deal with us. That God does not dismiss us. That the Gospel is a power for salvation for all who believe (Rom 116), a transformative,

joyful Message that can also save our communities from dehumanization and chaos, and can reform our world's morality. We are not alone. The Spirit works.

Therefore we may preach the Gospel of salvation, in spite of the critical voices heard in chapter 1.

3.6 Identifying God on the pulpit

3.6.1 LOOK CAREFULLY: WHAT DO YOU SEE?

The Gospel must be preached so that *hearing ultimately also becomes seeing*. God, while present, speaks so to us so that we can recognize Him as being present. The ears that hear the Gospel thus must also become the eyes that see God's presence. We must also put our eyes in our ears (Luther). But, what does this mean? And, how does this happen? Before we can attempt to answer these questions – accompany me on another visit to the art gallery! Let's allow the world of art to teach us a few preaching lessons



The riveting painting by Hans Holbein Jr, *The ambassadors* (1533), is on one of the walls. It depicts two wealthy and well-educated young men,

both French diplomats, viz. Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve. Around them are typical objects from the time of the Renaissance: a globe, a flute, a book, a telescope and other scientific instruments. At their feet is a long unidentifiable white object. Only if one looks at the painting from a certain angle – when the object is viewed at a slant, or “squint” – then one recognizes it ... it’s a human skull.

Suddenly, one sees the wealthy, well-educated young men, as well as the renaissance of human aptitude around them, in a more complex, transient perspective. The skull says: also the young, the strong and the intellectual have a skull at their feet. They too do not escape the pull of the grave.

The historical fact that both these two young men were extremely gifted, deepens the irony of the painting: while posing for the painting they were terminally ill. Both died at a young age.

Any good work of art does precisely this: it leads us by the hand to the place where we can look “cross-eyed”, to bring us to the correct coordinate, thus to place life in another, surprising – or disillusioning – perspective. A perspective that not necessarily would be perceptible if one merely noticed the obvious and conspicuous, while merely looking straight ahead at it. No, one must look deeper, pay attention to finer detail, to notice the reality behind, or rather, within the “external” and “ordinary” surface. (Good) art always demands a new observation position from us, but also new eyes, a rebirth of our senses, a change in our outlook.

Seeing precedes creation and, hopefully, flows therefrom. To be able to create, you must be able to see – otherwise you cannot allow others to also see. In this “seeing creating” lies the alpha and the omega of the creative process, thus the sense thereof. Artists cannot do without it! All good literature – to mention another form of art – is full of it. For example, it is portrayed in a moving manner in the classic *To kill a mockingbird* by Harper Lee, in which the reader views the world through the clear child’s eyes of the little protagonist, Scout. In the final scene, she looks with new eyes at the familiar neighbourhood in which she grew up. She suddenly “sees” the town in seasonal flashes with images of summer, autumn, winter and spring that follow like slides on a screen before her mind’s eye. In the book’s core sentence, she declares: *“I turned to go home. Streetlights winked down the street all the way to town. I had never seen our neighbourhood from this angle.”*

3.6.2 SLIT-EYED/OPEN-EYED THROUGH LIFE ...

That is art: to see the well known (the “old, old tidings”!) from a new, “pre-posterous” angle, and to retell it, redraw it, or otherwise recreate it so as to enable others also to see it from this new angle. It is to act like Robin

Williams, as the unorthodox teacher in the film, *Dead poet's society*, standing before the surprised children on top of the table and asking: What am I doing now? When one of them answers: You try to be taller than what you are, he corrects: I am viewing things from another perspective. From above here, everything looks different! Then he does an unheard-of thing, totally unconventional in the school's rigid, mouldy traditions – he also allows the children, two at a time, to climb onto the table for his “lesson” to be brought home!

Those who wish to create, must view things from “above” or from “below,” must, at least, observe the smaller things in life through slit-eyes and with wide-opened eyes, to take in as much as possible with shining eyes, like a child. Good artists are generally born with such slit-/wide-opened eyes. What Morley Callaghan says about writers, also applies to other forms of art: *“There is only one trait that marks the writer. He is always watching. It's a kind of trick of mind and he is born with it.”*

Here, by “seeing” I naturally mean more than mere biologically seeing. Of the best “seers” that I know, in fact, are biologically blind! By “see” I rather mean the entire way in which one observes life, with all the “senses” at your disposal. It is an observation where others do not (or will not) observe, sensitivity for the alternative, for beauty or for the ugly, or for beauty within the ugly, sensitivity for life itself; an openness to absorb the truth through all the nerves of your body and every fibre of your existence.

“All thinking begins with seeing; not necessarily through the eye, but with some basic formulations of sense perception, in the peculiar idiom of sight, bearing or touch, normally of all the senses together” (Langer 1980:216).

Without further comment, I quote: *“Whether it is a sublime thing or a little pool of milk lying on the table, it can be an image to you of something that is much more complicated”* (Sheila Cussons, in an interview with the *Volksblad*, 21 Aug 1979).

“But please, let me have plenty of detail. That's what counts in our business, tiny little details, like you had a broken shoelace on your left shoe, or a fly settled on the rim of your glass at lunch, or the man you were talking to had a broken front tooth” (Paivio 1971:442).

3.6.3 LOOK CAREFULLY: WHO DO YOU SEE?

Now, the question is: What does Christian art do, of which preaching is part, in my opinion, other than art in general? All art is the process and fruit of observation. What does the Christian artist, thus the preacher,

observe? Oversimplified, the answer is: God. In preaching – in faith! – the be all and end all is the *visio Dei*, the observation of (the invisible) God. By this, I do not mean biologically seeing in particular, but who can see God and remain alive? Therefore, God also does not allow us to see Him thus (cf Ex 33:20). This is about a vision of faith, of which one could say: Who does not see (thus), has nothing to say, nothing to preach about, nothing to testify about

The concept “see” is used in a variety of nuances in the Bible, and has been interpreted in the course of church history in different ways. In Scripture, it sometimes adopts the shape of a vision, with a concomitant ecstatic condition especially in the Old Testament prophets (cf Isa 1; Eze 12, etc). However, in the New Testament too, it always leads to a new revelation of the truth (underlined by hearing “inaudible” words), and a new awareness of God’s presence (cf Ac 9 and 16). The distinction between these visions and dreams is fluid and it usually deals with both immediate situations (cf Ac 12) as well as the prospect of what might still be in the distant future, but impending (cf especially Dan and Rev).

In the Gospels, it naturally attains the meaning of the disciples’ biological vision of Jesus during his earthly performance, and also after his resurrection. Many of the stories of his appearance report: “I have seen the Lord!” (Jh 20:18). Especially John uses the concept “see” deliberately in his Gospel, and mostly in an ambiguous way: there is more to seeing than what you, at first glance, can see, more than, for example, bread or water or light – they all have deeper dimensions and meanings. In virtually every chapter of his Gospel, John demonstrates that *to look* is not always *to see*. Therefore, the way in which you “see” means either redemption or judgement (cf 9:35-41). This applies especially to the way in which you look at Jesus. Externally, Jesus of Nazareth resembles an ordinary human being. But, look again! The disciples saw Him with their (biological) eyes, and yet saw more. They saw his glory, the glory that He, as the Father’s only Son, has, full of grace and truth (1:14; cf also 1 Jh 1:1-4). They saw his “inglorious glory”!

I use the concept “see” especially in the latter sense, as seeing-contrathe-ostensible, as seeing although you see a contradiction, as seeing God in the paradoxical, as being convinced of things that we do not see (now with our biological eyes) (Heb 11:1). Naturally, it is also something other than a mystical union with God, as often maintained by mysticism. It rather deals here with God who reveals Himself to us in a unique way, so that we can acquire a new vision of our place before God and also among our fellowmen.

In other words, Christian art and preaching is about pointing out and the expression of the reality of God in what is commonplace, with all the implications that it holds. Preaching must help us particularly to see the

invisible God (cf Heb 11:27). Therefore, the preacher is nothing but *a person on the pulpit who points God out*

A citation that illustrates this strikingly, is by Christoph Blumhardt, a German pastor from the previous century, who, two years before his death, in a moving sermon on the Beatitudes, pointed God out as follows:

One can see God on earth. Every day I look at the world around me, not to see atrocities, but something of the dear God. And truly, wherever you look, in the heavens and on earth, in the grass and in fruit trees, everywhere, also when it often is sad and awful, everywhere there is light. You can see God everywhere Also when your lot often seems mostly sad, give it a further penetrating look. You can also see something of God's glory therein, something of eternity itself (freely translated).

Light is everywhere! The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (Jh 1:5). For God even the darkness is not dark, and the night as light as day, darkness as good as light! (Ps 139:12). Truly, if one would venture to summarize the core of the biblical narrative in a few words, the answer would have to contain something of the following: God is with us. In a single Name, all the elements of the drama between God and humans are united: *Immanuel* (Mt 1:23). All calls to conversion in the Bible have, primarily, this as keynote: Just open your eyes! Do you see what stands firm? Or even better: do you see the One who stands before you?

3.6.4 ELIMINATION OR POINTING OUT?

What is the origin of *moralism* (legalism) other than a loss of vision of God? (Cf 3.7 also for examples of sermons.) *By way of speaking*, to eliminate God in sermons? Instead of people's eyes being opened to see God's great deeds of the past, present and future, the talk about God is as though He is not there, as though He is not the (original and final) Reality. With legalism, people's eyes are rather directed to themselves, and God rather is "absent" and his actions must be "activated" by human conduct. But, can we? No, preachers need not create God. God creates us. We need not give life to God by looking at Him, but (may) look because God lives. Alas, we look but so often miss it.

*Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning in "Aurora Leigh").*

Seeing is the sense of creation, as said before. In respect of preaching, it would read: to see God is the meaning of preaching, and indeed to preach so that the audience can see something of God; is to point to Him so that others too can understand something of Him. What enters their ears must, as it were, open their eyes from the inside. The ear that hears, the eye that sees – the Lord made them both (Pr 20:12). Rudolf Bohren (1981:71-73) carries one away with his sermon in this connection:

The infinite value of your hearing and seeing lies therein that it stems from the eternal God. You hear with ears that were made by the Creator of continents and oceans. You see with eyes that the Lord of the Milky Way galaxies gave you The history of poetry and music, the history of the art of painting and sculpture is but an echo of the infinite possibilities given to our eyes and ears Through these eyes and ears the Spirit gives us a new ability to observe, an ability that at once exceeds the limits of these eyes and ears.

This, especially, makes preaching an adventure during which we, with our slit-/wide-opened eyes, could ask daily: where is God working? A voyage of discovery in which we may find and follow the clues that God leaves us, wherein we may walk in his footsteps, footsteps that not only lie across holy cathedrals, but also in our places of employment and homes, through the kitchen and the office, yes, on apparently boring paths and through the dark depths of our everyday existence.

That is preaching: to walk through reality with slit-/opened eyes in the footprints of the real God – and to walk so that others want to join us, and to demonstrate so that others can also attain knowledge. It is to show and to say: you are surrounded on all sides – by God (Ps 139:5). In fact, does preaching have anything but this to say?

3.6.5 AND IF I DON'T SEE NOW?

Preaching deals with seeing and pointing out Him who is, with looking deeper than the surface, to distinguish God's presence in our reality. But, what if you look and look (deeply) ... and you never see anything? This, after all, is also an experience of faith all over the Bible: the not-seeing of God, the wrestling with His silence and absence, the sigh: my God, my God, why have You deserted me (Ps 22:2; Hab 113; Ps 42:2; Mk 15:34, etc).

Believers also sometimes go through a desert and winter experience, when everything around and in them contradicts entirely the good news of Immanuel, of God with us. Such times come not only in the lives of individual believers, but also in the history of the church or a specific church, with the experience that God is distant, that He has forgotten his people,

that he looks away (cf Ps 13:1-3). Even worse, when they experience that it was the Lord Himself who caused their misery! (Cf the refrain *You have ... You allow ... You disown ... Your wrath lies upon me...* e.g. in Ps 88.)

Then, you must not only look deeply, but also far – into God's future. Then you live not only from the reality of the Presence but, in particular, also from the reality of the Coming. Then only God's promises are enough, although fulfilment is yet to come for you. Then you pray with Sören Kierkegaard:

Father in heaven! You speak to humans in many ways: You, to whom all wisdom and intellect belongs, You wish to make Yourself conceivable to us anew. Oh, and also when You remain silent, then You still indeed speak to us; because also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to give his students the opportunity to have their say; also He that speaks sometimes remains silent to test his beloveds; also He who speaks sometimes remains silent to make the moment of understanding so much more profound when it comes. Father in heaven, is this not so? Oh, the time of silence, when a person stands alone and deserted, because we do not hear Your voice, then we feel that the separation will be forever. Oh, the time of silence, when a person thirsts in the desert, because we do not hear Your voice, and it seems as though we have been entirely forgotten! Father in heaven, then it is but a short pause in the coherence of the dialogue between You and us. So allow this also to be blessed, this silence of Yours, like every word of Yours to us. Do not let us forget that You also then speak, when You are silent; give us this consolation: that you remain silent out of love, just as You also speak out of love, so that now, whether You are silent and whether You speak, You are still the same Father; who acts with the same Fatherliness, whether you now lead us through Your voice, and whether You now teach us with Your silence.

Then, as in the list of examples of faith in Hebrews 11, you find consolation in merely looking from a distance, but yet rejoicing therein – because, after all, you at least see the future. As yet, you see nothing – because what a person already sees, you no longer hope for. Who hopes for that which he/she already sees? But, if we hope for that which we do not see, we wait for it with perseverance (Rom 8:24,25). Then you must see the present day along the detour of the future (Okke Jager). But this already is enough

3.6.6 AND AGAIN: WHO DO YOU SEE?

Furthermore, perhaps we do not see God in the present day, because we keep looking in the wrong places.

Those who see God, also see their fellowmen in a new light. And vice versa: Who truly sees their fellowmen, also see God in a new light!

Like the man in the French countryside who had a desire to attend a worship service, to again just see something of God amidst all the misery of war. He entered the church and saw that the interior was converted into a hospital: the Lord's table was an operating-table, the baptismal font a container for syringes, the church pews hospital beds for those awaiting operations or recovering therefrom Then, with a spark of insight, he saw something of God, something of the body of the Crucified, but also something of the closeness of the Crucified to others, by means of others

Therefore, preaching exists also therein that you will see and interpret people, yes, the entire spectrum of being human, from joy and prosperity to uncertainty, guilt and death, against the background, against the horizon of the Immanuel, who also is the Coming One. It is to see real, living people in their relation with the true, living God – even if they do not themselves understand or allow for that relation (cf Bohren 1981: 88-89). Martin Luther has a striking sermon on our often-misdirected view:

The world is full of God. In all alleys, in front of your door, you find Christ. Don't go to heaven and say: "Oh, if only I could see our Lord and God, How would I not serve Him in every possible way?" "If you want to serve me," says the Lord, "don't search for Me among the angels. I will enter your house, you will see Me hungry and needy, just open your eyes. If you want to love Me, love your neighbour." Yes, we seek Him where He is not to be found. He descended from heaven ... but we want to ascend to heaven!

Preaching, just like good art, is also critical of society – it cannot, may not pass those bleeding in war hospitals, the hungry in alleys, or the doors of the wealthy. It must be critical about a society that does not (want to) see such people. Those who (want to) see God, will also (have to) see broken and suffering people (cf also chapter 5).

Preaching, like art that always merely draws "pretty" pictures of life, has not yet looked at life deeply enough. The Gospel is not only "pretty," but it speaks also of self-denial and cross-carrying, of offerings and washing of feet, amidst a world characterized by hunger and war, barbed wire and gas masks, Ak-47s and infanticide. Yes, a world with days such as 11 September 2001 Therefore, "to see God" is not a sensational or triumphant rising above the reality – although it could easily bring you to the edge of the heresy of triumphalism! In fact, triumphalism is a heresy because it is not as mundane as the Gospel, because it passes by Christ's cross, where indeed He wrestled with the mundane, with the

need and death that still characterizes our life here on earth. Who wish to prepare a “visionary” sermon, will have to remain *at the foot of the cross*, may indeed proclaim nothing but Christ

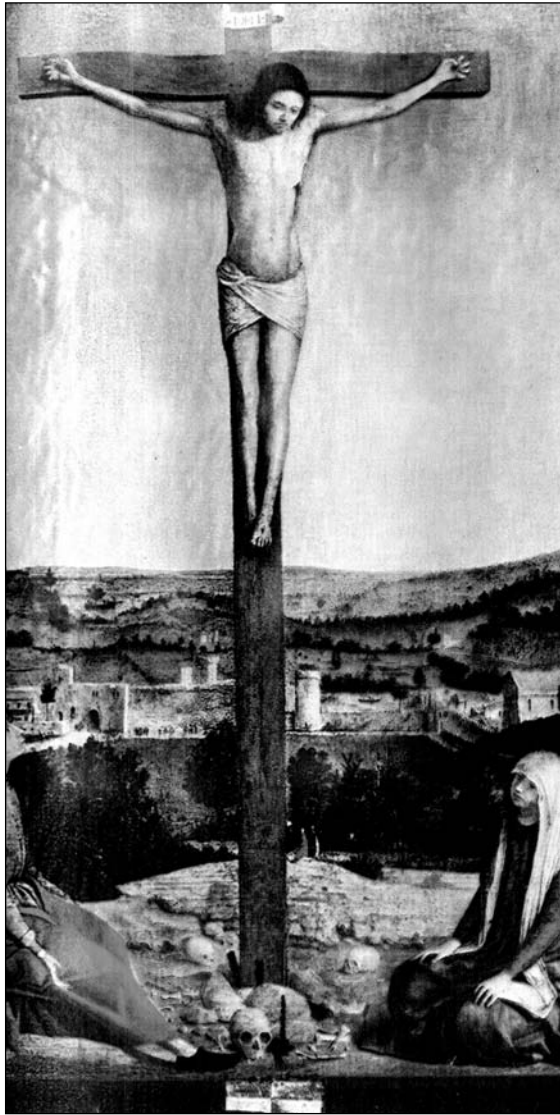
Preaching that pretends to see God, therefore, may not present uninhabitable visions to the congregation, but inhabitable visions, in which people of flesh and blood, people that still find themselves in this dispensation, can come home. Visionary preaching is not far-fetched, but open horizons that may well be far-fetched, seen from afar and longed for, but which can be reached, because you know that you will be brought there.

That I must (can) see and point God out in preaching, fortunately does not mean that I must have steel in my eyes, rather broken sight; so that I sometimes must hang my head. In fact, precisely people who let their heads hang, who succeed better than others to look “cross-eyed,” who can see more easily the mysteries of the kingdom of God, who can more easily humble themselves and stand in awe – can begin to preach.

Besides, those who hang their heads to look with squint eyes, also find it easier to bow their heads in prayer. This style of prayer must permeate the preaching and the worship service – the entire life – from beginning to end. Because, to see God is not a matter of course or a permanent condition. Every morning, as an act of grace, I must receive new eyes in order to stand in awe and find joy in discovering and seeing God, and to point Him out from the pulpit

What I said earlier about seeing creating precedence and following-up, must now be qualified: Before you can see and preach, you must (continue to) pray, as Paul says: so that your spiritual eyes can be enlightened ... (Eph 1:18; cf chapter 6).

I reiterate: *those who wish to prepare a visionary sermon, will have to remain at the foot of the cross*. Now, I think it's again time for a visit to the art gallery. Let's have a look at, for example, Antonello Da Messina's *The Crucifixion*. There hangs the Crucified, and, if you look carefully, as in Hans Holbein Jr's *The Ambassadors*, at His feet there is a skull, in fact a number of skulls. Apparently, also Jesus does not escape the power of the skull. But, have a good look. Close your eyes into slits and then open them wide. Do you see it? The cross is not only the symbol of death, but also the symbol of life. The skulls remind one that the skull of this Crucified would never bleach in a grave. The skulls die with Him, because death has been conquered



Before you see the skull of transitoriness at your feet, you need a change of perspective. But, also vice versa: before you can look further than this skull and see life, intransitoriness, you need a further change of perspective that is only to be found at the place of the Skull, i.e. at God-present-even-unto-death. Only there can one find the correct coordinate about where you can see life – the resurrection. Only there, at this cross, you can see further, yes, can see an eternity further, the place where there will never ever again be skulls, because death will be no more (Rev 21:4).

3.7 The elimination of God on the pulpit¹⁵

However, the sad reality is that many preachers, in fact, do not preach this Gospel of salvation – although they often think that they indeed do so. They change the Gospel into moralization, i.e. into a moralistic appeal for self-improvement. What is moralism? In brief: it draws a line through all the points of departure that have been presented thusfar. The presence of God, his speaking to us, the fact that they are salvific words – as indicated in 3.6.4 – in fact, is being reversed: in moralism we must, as it were, present God, activate his Word, and then we, ourselves, must bring about salvation. This sounds like a harsh judgement, but many examples that follow, may illustrate something of this.

The linguistic structure that generally indicates moralism, is *conditional syntax*. Linguistically, such conditional constructions are expressions of a more comprehensive phenomenon, i.e. that of *conjunctive figures of speech*. These figures of speech discuss realities as possibilities, and possibilities are postulated instead of realities in the form of the unreal (the so-called *conjunctivus irrealis*). Should the reality of salvation (God's presence and salvific words) be discussed in this way, the implication would be that God is changed into a Postulate, a Possibility expressed in unreal, conditional terms – and only “activated” by human actions.

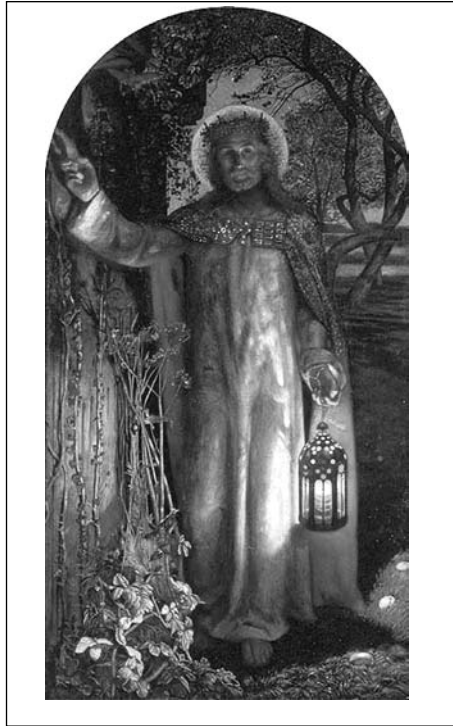
For example, a sermon about the moving prologue of the Gospel of John

15 I do the following sermon analyses, and also those in the chapters to come, from the specific viewpoint of the Reformed understanding of the relationship between law and Gospel and, therefore, also among sin, salvation and obedience. The following framework supplies the reader with a key for reading and understanding these sermon analytical passages:

God's Word to us forms a unity, is an indivisible revelation of Himself to us, in which He receives the honour from beginning to end. The aim of this unified Word is to transform us so that we may become what God has planned for us: to be Christians and, therefore, truly human beings, God's people.

Within this one Word of revelation there are various forms, and we see different faces of God, but they remain the same God who encounters us in such a way that we, indeed, become new people. The including circle always remains God's one Word of revelation to us. This Word is deed simultaneously. It comes to us dynamically through the working of the *Holy Spirit*. But, it also comes to us in a variety of ways. The Word of revelation primarily comes to us as a *word of salvation* – to free us from the sin, which God Himself revealed to us through His law. However, it also comes to us as law that reveals our *sin* (the so-called first function of the law), and so urges us towards Christ (the second function of the law, also called *usus elenchticus* or *usus paedagogicus*, and when it concerns more than just personal sin, but also societal sin, *usus politicus*). It also comes to us as guidance for a *life of obedience* to God, which the Lord Himself creates in us through grace (the third function of the law, also called *usus tertius*).

(1:1-18), illustrates dramatically this grammatical and principal elimination of God. The entire sermon deals with the question why Jesus would be “special,” and to provide answers to this question, biblical texts are firstly *atomized* (small sections from them are quoted out of context), and, secondly, *moralized* when the preacher extracts ten lessons from the text to prove that Jesus is special. In the process, wonderful, true things about Jesus are said, but He is also rendered harmless, and is forced to passivity under the conditions of the actions of pious people, with the implication: when people have accepted Jesus, only then can his light shine in the darkness.



The sermon ends with a beautiful but, theologically, an extremely tempting image, portraying Jesus as One standing outside the door of a house with a lamp in his hand, a door that has not been opened for a very long time – it is practically overgrown. Jesus stands and He knocks – a reference to Revelation 3:20 – but nobody opens the door. The door has only one handle, which is on the inside. Jesus cannot open it from the outside.

... I want to remind you – the handle is on the inside. It's on your side of the door. And Jesus is the perfect gentleman. He never forces His way in.

He waits for you to acknowledge that you need Him. He waits for you to put your hand out and grab hold of the handle and open the door and say "Come into my life, Lord Jesus." I want to ask you this morning in the light of what we've been hearing, don't you want to do just that?

Jesus is wonderful, "special," but harmless. With his lamp he stands outside, not knowing what to do and powerless. He wants to allow his light to shine in the dark, but he cannot. The acting, recreating God of the John-prologue, the One who not only wants to save the world, but allows his light actually to shine in the dark, becomes a static God, a motionless Possibility.

"*He waits for you ... He waits for you,*" says the preacher. The text of his sermon reads: *The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has never put it out* (Jh 1:5). In the sermon a pious preacher and pious people do exactly that – they put his light out! Or, at least, leave Him to stand outside in the gloom with his dim little light

The mere presence of Christological titles and formulae, of which there is an abundance in the history of dogma, does not necessarily mean that the preacher understands the content. In fact, should they be measured in the light of their historical origins – such titles and formulae are entirely out of sync with what actually happens in the sermon. They pop up either as clichés or as strange figures in the structure of the sermon. Such titles and formulae are often robbed of their content and power. This often indicates preachers' embarrassment to express anew and timeously the wonder of the salvation in Christ, therefore, they prefer to flee back to a pious past, in concepts that the preachers themselves, no longer understand, but that sound right and give the preachers a good conscience. Dogmatic-historical correctness does not necessarily imply evangelical truth. The Gospel does not come in formulae, but in power.

3.7.1 A SUBSTITUTE FOR GOD?

In many sermons, it is clear that preachers quote Christological formulae and titles without making use of their evangelical quality. This also applies to the use of other images, names and predicates of God. This seemingly is correct but, should certain key sentences of the sermon be analyzed, it appears that God, in fact, is excluded methodologically and syntactically. However, in a variety of ways, which all include the above-mentioned conditional tendency, they muzzle and replace God. The most general substitute is the *homo religiosus*, i.e. religious person. For example: a person can be busy in such a way with a "spiritual war" that the human being is central, not God. Contest evil so, as though God is not the Conqueror

A definition of a “battle prayer” like the following, makes one wonder who actually is the conqueror: Christ or the supplicant? “*To (continuously) enforce the finished work of Christ onto the powers of evil in their attacks on a place or a person, until the victory is won*” To enforce? After all, the implication is: Christ’s work is finished, but it does not stretch far enough. I, the supplicant must enforce it, activate it, put it in operation over evil – until victory is gained! Well, it is a fact – we do have a battle to fight (cf Eph 6). But, the battle that we must fight (*militia Christiana*) is to remain within Christ’s victory. In fact, the struggle has already taken place. The Evil has been conquered. But we are indeed still struggling against him (*militia*), but it is a battle of more than conquerors (*Christiana*).

Pronouncements, such as the following, are most profoundly not only untheological, but – despite good intentions with it – God-dishonouring in the sense that it deprives God of the honour: “*Nothing happens in the kingdom of God without first praying.*” Truly? Nothing? Then, is God so passive until we eventually move Him to allow something to happen? No, God indeed takes the initiative – in his pre-grace (cf 3.5.1.2) – also when we pray: *I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I* (Isa 65:1). This precisely is the Gospel!

However, one struggles to hear the Gospel when the following question and answer burden you with the impossible: “*Why pray? To put God’s power into operation.*” No, prayer does not *activate* God’s power. The Lord does not slumber and sleep. At most, it activates us. By God’s merciful action in us.

Pronouncements such as this, except for the fact that it is misleading (we think that we are capable of certain things, but are not), are also only *seemingly* exciting. Ultimately, they cause depression or boredom. Nothing can substitute the “thrill” of the surprising Gospel of grace! A Gospel that says that, by his grace, God, Himself, makes his Word true

So, many sermons literally take out of God’s hands this “making true” (in terms of language) of the sermon by God Himself. His actions (as expressed by the biblical text), are not further propounded, so that people could act accordingly, but rather reversed – now made dependent on human actions. An *anthropocentric reversal* takes place: it is no longer God who creates a situation, but people who must recreate a situation to induce God to act. For example, one hears this reverse process clearly in a sentence such as the following: “*After all, Jesus commanded that we must love each other in all circumstances. Only then does he regard us as his disciples, his followers.*” But, who on earth then *qualifies* to be a disciple of Jesus?

3.7.2 THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF LEGALISM

Legal talk mostly sounds correct, but it has no Content. Rhetorically, it can carry one away, yet it is religious bla-bla. It remains empty talk, because it does not express God's reality and working here and now. Legalistic sermons declare what God has done, possibly will do again, and what people must do to allow God to do again what He has done before. One could indeed briefly summarize the basic structure of all legalistic sermons as follows:

- God did (in the past)
- God will or wants to (in future), and
- We must (in the present).

The point of departure of all legalistic sermons, most profoundly, is God's current absence, and this vacuum must be filled with the pious zeal of the *homo intactus* (unbroken human). The miracle of the *praesentia realis dei* (the true presence of God) becomes overworked and is eliminated by the modus of the *subjunctivus irrealis*.

One finds a classic example of the above-named basic structure of legalism in a sermon on Joshua 3:1-17, when Israel was on the verge of crossing the river Jordan. In this history, the preacher finds a parallel with South Africa that faces an uncertain future, a future in which property, political power, the guarantees of employment opportunities and the progress of businesses are threatened. Against the background of these uncertain times, the congregation is called to trust in God, to acknowledge and accept Him, as they need God's "divine intervention," as in the case of Israel that had to cross the Jordan.

With the help of quotations from the letter to the Hebrews, as well as from the book Joshua, the preacher underlines "the miraculous working power of God amongst the people of Israel," in a rhetorically outstanding way, and emphasizes: "God cares ... rescues ... sets them on a new path." What God did in the (recent) past in South Africa (with the first general election in April 1994), is then described as another example of his miraculous initiative.

This so far in respect of the *past*. However, when the preacher examines the *present*, and speaks to the audience who *now* live, then the tone of the sermon changes completely. This is evident from the following key sentence: "*God wants to encourage faith in us so that we might trust Him. He wants us to embrace his Lordship.*"

Now, there is only mention of God's "intent," a mere possibility of things that could happen. Why this sudden change of tense? This probably takes place because the preacher wishes to prepare his audience for the

second part of his sermon, in which he wants to “apply” what he has thus far said to the people who live in uncertain times and who approach an uncertain future. Thus, the break and contrast expressed in the word, “But.” The following key sentence introduces the second part of the sermon: “*But what does the Jordan story have to say to us this morning?*” “But” forms the bridge between God’s historic deeds and his future intentions, expresses the tension between what He has done in South Africa and what He will still do during the transition. The second part of the sermon indeed leans strongly towards the future, and emphasizes possibilities.

Perhaps the following sentences best illustrate this tension between the history of salvation and the possibility of salvation. The preacher first looks at the biblical text and says: “*Friends, Joshua was not afraid because God went before him.*” Then he turns to the congregation and declares: “*How are you crossing your Jordan today? Is it alone? Is it by your own strength? God wants to go before you. God wants to lead you. God wants to help you.*” Said with respect: God is put on stand-by. He must stand and wait. He is eager to act, but does not do so. Why not? Because something must happen first, certain conditions must first be fulfilled. But what?

First, the audience must act. Between God’s deeds in the past and his deeds in the future, stand the congregation’s present deeds. Therefore, it is with entire consistency that the preacher continues by saying: “*The Jordan story tells us what we must do.*”

Now, the emphasis is no longer on what God did, according to the Jordan narrative, but on what the listeners *must* do. While the present, indicative grammatical structures dominate the first part of the sermon, and the future and unreal dominate the second part, the imperative mainly structures the third part. We hear repeatedly: “*... you must ... we mustwe must ... you must.*”

The preacher interprets, albeit unconsciously, the present as a vacuum between God’s deeds and his possibilities. The unbroken *homo religiosus* fills this vacuum. Through his/her choice, the future – what God wants to do – becomes similar to the past – what God has done. People most currently allow the future to be the same as the past. In reality, in this way the present is stripped of God’s actions.

The way in which the preacher falls into the legalistic trap, appears dramatic and concentrated in a number of sentences in which, inter alia, also the first part of the biblical text, Joshua 3:5, is cited: “*Consecrate yourself to God.*” The supplement or interpretation that follows, however, reveals the sermon’s real points of departure: “*What happens when you consecrate yourself to God? The Lord will do amazing things among you. So you see, my friends, when you commit your life to God that’s precisely what you will see.*”

The biblical text, Joshua 3:5, says precisely not this, but rather the fol-

lowing: Purify yourselves, because tomorrow the Lord will perform miracles among you. The *because* of the biblical text, in the sermon becomes *when*. The text's sequence has been reversed exactly. The sermon changes the reason or basis of the appeal for sanctification into the outcome or result of sanctification. Naturally, there is a huge difference between them. In his zeal to fill what he experiences as a vacuum between the past and present, the preacher changes the actions and situation of the Israelites which, in the biblical text, were the supposition for the proclamation of God's great deeds. Now, this becomes the condition that the present congregation must fulfil to make the great deeds true again. Israel's reaction, preconditioned in the biblical text, becomes a conditioning action in the sermon; the specific situation becomes a determining situation. Between the cup (the biblical text) and the lip (the sermon) is the slip (moralism). This has far-reaching consequences. Now God's actions depend on whether, and to what degree, we can purify ourselves, and then also "most completely." But, must we purify ourselves completely *before* God can act? Does the *Gospel* really mean that?

3.7.3 MORALISM AND GOD'S IMAGE

Preachers must be careful especially in their choice of *images* that they use *in respect of God*. They often betray an underlying image of God. Here I present only one example as a deterrent. It appears in a sermon on Isaiah 1:16-18, in which the preacher, believe it or not, compares God with rather read it yourself:

In all the anger and hatred, did you perhaps miss the beauty of the world this morning? This reminds me of the story of the two donkeys that were tied to the two ends of a rope. Now, just beyond their reach were two heaps of carrots. Peculiar to donkeys, they pulled against each other to reach the carrots. This merely resulted in their fatigue. When both were very tired, they sat together and decided to go first to the one heap and then to the other. We are just like the donkeys. We are at the one end and God is at the other end. I pull to the best of my ability in my own direction. I keep on pulling and, eventually, I am so tired that I fall to my knees with fatigue. This is when God who is at the other end of the rope, comes and helps you. Then we first go to the one problem and then to the other.

God and a human being in a rope-pulling equilibrium? God, like a tired donkey? While, in fact, Isaiah glows of God's merciful initiative that repeatedly saves his people, whether on their knees or not: "*Come now, let us reason together ...*" (Isa 1:18).

3.7.4 GOD'S ANTHROPONYMIC SUBORDINATION

What really happens in sermons of this nature? As said before, the answer may seem to be a harsh judgement, but it has not been fabricated or lightly formulated: God is pushed aside. Sadly enough, this probably is a universal homiletic phenomenon, a short-circuit that, from time to time, takes place on virtually all pulpits with far-reaching consequences. For example, after an extensive examination of German sermons on Providence, Rudolf Landau came to the conclusion that a wide-spread *anthroponymic subordination* of God takes place, a suppression according to human norms. The dogmatic topics of the *concursus Dei* or the *cooperatio Dei et hominum* (way in which God and humans “cooperate”) is generally understood thus, or in any case expressed thus in language, that God’s acts are subordinated to the general morality of human acts.

In my opinion, it is important to note that this is not about a theological misconception that lies on the periphery, but about the mother of all misconceptions that radically affects the heartbeat of all true theology. However, with these few quotations, we have only touched the tip of the iceberg. The deeper misery of this mother of all misconceptions, i.e. the most extreme and logical consequence of legalism lies even much deeper. One could certainly speculate about the effect of this on congregations who heard these sermons. However, fundamentally, it is a continuous cancellation of the reality of God. Luther called the negation of this reality an *annihilatio Dei*, an elimination of God. Legalistic sermons proclaim an unreal God, speak about the salvation of the world as though God does not exist, as though God, silent and idle, hesitates on the edge of our life’s world. It crosses out the crucifixion and resurrection, the glorification of Christ and the pouring out of his Spirit. Legalistic sermons have a negative escalating effect: they not only render the biblical text speechless (cf chapter 4), but the congregation lives in the delusion of ennoblement (chapter 5), the preacher becoming lonely (chapter 6), and, especially, God is eliminated on the pulpit. The latter is the most radical moment in the definition of legalism that this book deals with. All forms of legalism head in this direction; herein lies its actual and ultimate aim.

But ... can God be eliminated? Yes and no. No: to speak about the elimination of God is hypothetical. It is indeed the wonder of God that He, despite all that we do to, and with, Him, He still remains God. And especially: that people cannot actually and ultimately muzzle the power of the Gospel! God’s Word cannot be bound with chains! The Word does not return empty to the Sender! Yes: God’s Word can be stymied on the shallow, infertile ground, the penal mentality, the thorn and thistle attitude described by the sower (cf Lk 8:4-15). One can stop one’s ears, or

indeed listen ... but not hear. In this ostensible dialectic indeed lies the mystery of the working of God's Word, a dialectic that we must not try to "solve" in any way. Through his irresistible grace, God comes and He Himself creates the listeners to his Word. And yet – these listeners sometimes can remain stone deaf! However, in all, God still remains God.

In our sermons God must be described with doing words. He works. He is God in movement, who repeatedly works anew and surprisingly, repeatedly is on course with his Kingdom and his world. For this reason, the theology of our sermons must be an "open" theology, an en-route theology, in which God's involvement repeatedly makes people stand in awe. Therefore, our sermons may never manipulate and subordinate God and paint Him into a sterile, arrived theological corner, in which the preacher knows precisely how God "will" act.

3.7.5 A LEGALISTIC APOCALYPTIC

If we now touch a little lower than the tip of the iceberg, we discover: not alone do legalistic sermons cross out the reality of God's *presence*, but also the reality of Him in the *future*. In legalistic sermons, God is no more, and He also does no longer come. People – unbroken, religious people – now are his substitutes. We often hear: God "will," but this is not an eschatological "will," not God's coming through his free grace, rather a coming that is determined by the degree of people's commitment and the intensity of their performance. *Legalistic sermons are principally uneschatological.* Hope, as a perspective on God's promises, is exchanged for the intense piety of the religious person. In place of God's promises (*promissio Dei*), is human potential (*potentia populi*). In a sense, the circle is complete here: not alone does a healthy creational doctrine (cf also chapter 5) fall away from legalistic sermons, but also the *eschatology*. A search for the Alpha and the Omega, for the One who is, who was and who will be, the Almighty, in such sermons is in vain (Rev 1:8).

In legalistic sermons there are no sighs with the creation for the liberation of the addiction to transience in order to attain the glory that behoves God's children (Rom 8:21). In legalistic sermons we, ourselves, rather put right the world. Or, at least, we live under the illusion that we can.

But, what happens if the eschatological horizon in sermons falls away? Moralism's stereotype answer to this reads: provide a substitute! In the case of eschatology, it usually is a distorted type of apocalyptic. This apocalyptic offers a framework within which people can be forced with great urgency and often also with open or concealed threats to react to the preacher's demands. This gives the imperatives a certain tenseness, an insuperability, a placing in a space pregnant with cosmic and catastrophic

issues. In extreme cases, this leads to Last Judgement preaching – which certainly has a place – degenerating to perverted hell-preaching. This all becomes a mighty rhetorical instrument in the preacher's hand to persuade people toward the desired actions or attitudes. However, the irony is: changes brought about by fear and as a result of threats, do not last. Patterns of life that originate from this, normally are not of a profound nature. In fact, fear creates greater fear. Threats make one intense, but do not console – while indeed this is the aim of the true biblical apocalyptic, even when it is a mighty proclamation of God's judgement.

I refer to a sermon on 1 John 2:18 ff. Closely examined, everything in the sermon, from the basic structure to the ingenious rhetoric, has been implemented to prepare a negative climate. Apart from the apocalyptic text chosen – certainly the preacher's good right – a negative human image is gradually built up so that the sermon can address people who are not of the required standard. They are weaklings whose lives are a failure, people who hesitate. Especially the link between the apocalyptic text and today, when people experience the “new” South Africa, offers the preacher a strong expedient to appeal to his/her listeners. The biblical text deals with the “last hour” in which the antichrist acts; the sermon conveys the impression of people living in the new South Africa in this last hour in which the antichrist's powers, yes, the devil himself is working actively in a struggling land full of many dangers. Now, who can say no if this is the background against which the appeals are made? The point is just that, in all this, the congregation indeed is left with a series of obligation, but disconsolate. Indeed, the sermon begins with emphasizing the objective salvation, *extra nos*, but, under the influence of the rising imperative line, it weakens to such a degree that the preacher can close only with the scant declaration that God (possibly) “can give” us certain things – should we, naturally, behave as desired. The sermon is rounded off with an exhausting sentence which might send the congregation home determined, but disconsolate: “*This is how He (God) wants it and this is what we must be. Amen.*”

This was the first round of our sermon-analytical tour through the minefield of the theological disintegration of voices (cf 2.5.2). Sentences – and analyses – such as these pose, as it were, the following core question, a question that no preacher of the Word can escape: But, how must I then preach the *Gospel*? To this, *inter alia*, we pay attention in the next chapter.

Sermon example 1

JESUS ONLY (Mark 9:2-8)

In the San Marco museum in Florence, there is a remarkable painting by the 15th century artist, Fra Angelico. It portrays the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain, and the figure of Christ, which forms the focal point, fills virtually the whole painting. He stands with arms outstretched, surrounded by a heavenly white light. At the edge of the painting – literally and figuratively – one sees the frightened disciples, Peter, James and John. At the sides, inter alia, also Moses and Elijah look inward, worshipping the glorified Christ.



The longer one looks at the painting, the more one discovers in it – as is the case with good art. In the forefront, as it were, as the first dimension, naturally, is the glorified Christ, the Lord of the history and the world, the King of the church. However, if you look a little deeper, you see the second dimension: Christ's arms are stretched out exactly like they were on the cross, with his palms turned to the front, as they were nailed to the cross. The painting wants to say: the One who is glorified, is nobody else but the One who would be crucified and the One who would be crucified, is the One who is glorified.

Who is Jesus to you? What picture arises in you when you hear the Name Christ? Come, let us be honest: do we not prefer picture number one to picture number two? The glorified Christ to the Crucified?

In any case, Peter articulates this choice not only on behalf of the three disciples on the mountain, but on behalf of many, when shaken, he stutters: *“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah”* (5). In spite of his being overwhelmed, Peter knew deep within himself that to be with the glorified Christ, is the acme of human existence. Actually, everything is about this. Here, heaven touched the earth, and heaven and earth were combined. Here, in this Christ’s circle of light, we have arrived. Here, we want to remain as long as we can – no, forever. Oh, may this Jesus never forsake us again! Could we not offer Him a permanent home, a hut, an eternal residence with us ...?

One certainly couldn’t blame Peter. In fact, everything in this story intends to point out the wonder of this glory. The story is full of rich symbolism. The “six days” referred to at the beginning (2), probably is a literary technique to indicate that the moment was expectant for revelation, that, indeed, it was a loaded moment. Naturally, the high mountain is a typical biblical indication of a venue for an encounter between God and humans, a place where you, as it were, are closest to heaven. The appearance of Jesus with his gleaming clothes, snow white as nobody on earth could make it (3), reminds one of a supernatural Godly glory – that now appears here on earth. Moses and Elijah are, par excellence, representatives of God’s revelations to his people in the Old Testament, and the voice that speaks from the cloud, reminds you of God’s many revelations to this people, for example on Mount Sinai. In short, what happened here, is wonderful, Godly, glorious. It declares that the One who stands in the centre, in fact, is the beloved Son of the Father, as the voice from the cloud says – an acknowledgement that one finds all through the Gospel of Mark.

The events on the high mountain are, as it were, a prelude to the future, a curtain that was opened, a veil that was lifted, not only to Jesus’ resurrection from the grave – because there are clear parallels between the transfiguration on the mountain and Jesus’ resurrection – but especially to our eternal future: worshipping the glorified Jesus. Oh, and who would not want to experience this now already, who of us do not yearn to go with Paul and to be with Christ, because would this not be by far the best for us (Phil 1:23)? Why must we still wait so long for this? Why can’t we arrive at our eternal destination now? Why can’t we just cross over from this world of the dead to the world of the living, and the Living?

No, the text says we cannot yet. We have not yet arrived at that dispensation. Time for crossing over has not yet dawned. We are still in this dispensation, and must still move down the mountain, back to the valleys, the

depths, everyday life, taking up of your cross and following Christ, the Crucified. We cannot build huts for the Lord, cannot keep Him with us – in any case, not in such a way. We, ourselves, do not even have huts in which we can live on earth forever; we rather are aliens and strangers (1 Pet 2:11). Therefore, Mark 9:8 significantly says: *Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus*. Only Jesus alone, no longer with a heavenly glow surrounding him, or a voice that speaks from the cloud. Only Jesus alone, as the disciples got to know Him; only Jesus alone, and his words to be obeyed (7b).

Yes, naturally the Lord gives us certain “mountain-top experiences” from time to time, moments full of glory, when you needn’t even stand on your toes to touch heaven. Moments in which your feet, as it were, are lifted slightly from the ground and you can see the future, the end purpose of it all, clearer than ever. This can happen in a worship service, while reading a biblical verse, or a soft touch of grace for which you have no words. Then you just know: I have come home, and this knowledge takes your breath away.

But then ... this also passes. Then you realise afresh: these experiences are bonuses, they do not last. Then it is again you and Jesus alone. A Jesus whose words you must obey. Then, the second picture, the one of the Crucified, shifts to the fore, and you hear his voice: *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Mk 8:34).

This story was placed in Mark to remind us that we cannot live from a theology of glory in this dispensation, but from a theology of the cross, that the first picture that arises in us when we hear the Name Christ, is of the Man on the cross. We must again go down the mountain, away from the sphere of the transfiguration, to serve the Lord in obeying and following Him. After all, we do not live in beholding, but in hope (cf Rom 8: 24,25). One recalls what Kierkegaard said:

“There was a time, and it came so naturally, it was childlike – when I believed that God’s love is also expressed by his sending earthly ‘good gifts,’ happiness, prosperity. How arrogant was my soul in desire and daring I prayed for everything, even the most presumptuous things And when this succeeded, how rich was my soul in gratitude, so happy to say thank You – because I was convinced that God’s love is expressed in the good gifts of the earth that He had sent me.

“Now, it is different. How did this happen? Quite simply, but gradually. I gradually discovered that all whom God really loves, the examples of believers through the ages, all had to suffer in this life. I also discovered that this is the message of Christianity: to be loved by God, is to suffer.”

Most profoundly, this is the message of the transfiguration on the mountain: this is who Christ is – the eternal Son of God – but, in this way, He is not yet present with us now. Now, His kingdom is still greatly concealed. He comes to us, not as a gleaming apparition, but in the persons of the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the ill and the prisoners (cf Mt 25:31-46). He is one of the least in our midst. You can easily miss seeing Him, easily mistake Him. *O yes, He is the Glorified, but even as the Glorified, He is present with us as the Crucified.* This is the way in which his Kingdom today comes in our midst and becomes visible – for those who wish to see it. God's Kingdom comes in secret. But it is here! It is in our midst!

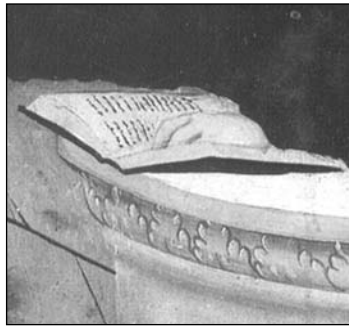
Helmut Thielicke writes poignantly about this in his book about the Our Father (The prayer that spans the earth): This book was written during World War II, when the churches in which they gathered, were bombed one after another. Just in that time, says he, they could see the coming of God's Kingdom clearer than in times when all went well, because then they were again dependent on God. They realized anew: God's Kingdom comes truly among the ruins, also the ruins of our lives' failures. He writes, *inter alia*, as follows:

“God’s greatest mysteries always play out in the depths ... God builds his Kingdom in secret. It is like building a bridge that is built under much scaffolding and boarding so that one cannot see the building work itself. One just hears the thousands of strokes of hammers. One day the scaffolding and boarding is taken away and the work of the builders stands before our wondering and ashamed eyes. God was not idle while we sought in vain for signs of his footprints and his work.”

This is how it is: we now live in the dispensation of the building process, of rendering service, of hope without seeing. But, we are not alone. If you look long enough at it, on Fra Angelico's painting, another, a third picture appears from the paint: the one of the glorified, crucified Christ that stretches his arms out to you, to put them around you and his church, saying: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age* (Mt 28:20). The painting confirms: we are no longer (or not yet!) on the mountain. We are in the valley, in the depths. But, we have Jesus with us. Only Jesus alone.

And that is enough.

The living voice of the gospel: When the Biblical text speaks



In this chapter we consider the role of the biblical text in preaching, in the light of:

- The nature of Scripture itself, as a multidimensional, human and Godly document with a unique message
- The responsibility of preachers, therefore, to listen to Scripture in the correct manner, and
- Examples of sermons resulting from a failed (moralistic) hearing of Scripture.



4.1 The multidimensionality of Scripture ...

God is present, but the Word, the Gospel in it, must *say* this to us before we can *see* it. This *seeing* indeed is a powerful event that simultaneously opens our eyes for the Presence, i.e. it gives us glasses through which we can see the presence of the acting and saving God (Calvin). Therefore, it is of critical

importance that we understand the nature, the function, but especially the miracle and “fullness,” the multidimensionality, of these glasses.

In the Bible we hear stories of people who saw God and then retold their stories – we want to do exactly this in our preaching! Scripture indicates the “style” that is fitting for observing God. It does not contain mere clinical comments or bare facts (*bruta facta*) about God, but rather offers examples of how one should speak when one sees God – like John the Baptist, when he shouts and points: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jh 1:29).

In a variety of ways the Bible calls out: *Aha!* The Bible articulates this so that it makes you wonder, draws you in ... until you attain a new discovery of yourself, of others, and of God. In short, until you see as never before. It is especially this school where, other than elocution exercises, you can also do eye exercises and undergo eye tests. In a narrative way, the Bible opens new horizons, new perspectives of which you would never have dreamt! It offers alternatives, which, in fact, entails that you see the world afresh – the world in which you currently live – and inhabit it newly, thus making it new.

Could one exhaust the fullness of Scripture with a single sermon or method of preaching? Of course not! We must not perceive a sermon to be a final product that is produced like an article for the market; rather as a process, a development that has many points of contact, inclusive, with open arms. A sermon is not an end product, not a final, finished-off speech that is 100% correct! Actually, we cannot finish sermons, at most shout from time to time about the encounter that we enjoyed with God in the biblical text. Sermons may have, and even should have “holes,” “linguistic gaps” (Umberto Eco) in them, areas which we do not fully understand, but within which we can hear the whisperings of the present God

We must indeed preach so that we keep our options open, in the sense that we reveal a basic mistrust of exclusive methods of exegesis or forms of sermons that, as “recipes,” guarantee an “objective” and fault-free preaching result.

In this sense, the objective of a sermon thus is not only to convey unsailable certainties, but especially to open new perspectives on these certainties, a new imagination “to picture, portray, receive and practice the world in ways other than it appears to be at first glance when seen through a dominant, habitual, unexamined lens” (Brueggemann 1993:13). For this, communication with the biblical text is indispensable: it offers the source that cannot be diminished, smothered, eradicated or dimmed by our stereotypes. To the contrary, those who remain “hard at the text” will discover: I am liberated from my stereotypes, my boredom and, therefore, my lack of humility and awe

The old ways in which ecclesiastical “absolute” truths were articulated in the past, are (fortunately) currently being questioned – especially also because these truths or this knowledge often led to the misuse of power (as expressed in the idiom: knowledge is power?).

The patriarchal, hierarchical, authoritarian and monologic style that characterized so many of our sermons (cf again chapter 1), must now make room for a greater sensitivity for the variety of congregational needs, but also for the multilevelled nature of the biblical text itself – which includes the possibility of more than one “right” answer or message, as well as the preferability of a redistribution of past interpretative privileges.

In the past, we could, for example, too easily pretend that we could allow the truth, as it were, to crystallize clearly as the absolute core of certainty by means of our exegetical methods. The great disadvantage of this point of departure was the fact that it (unconsciously?) contributed to kind of solidifying our image of God to a patternlike insertion of God into our little scheme, to his being rendered harmless and being domesticated according to our stereotypes.

This phenomenon of stereotyping was especially painful in the era of the so-called “national preaching” in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, when the being and acts of God were determined precisely and absolutely in a type of “analogic schematism.” In this, a fixed image of humans and of God develops. Non-recurrent situations and events of the past were transferred unchanged onto current situations and events, and the incomparable God’s dynamic and surprising actions (HW Wolff) were dangerously reduced. He then *had* to act precisely as in the past – especially also because we “convinced” Him to do so with all kinds of moralistic performances. One heard preachers from that time say countless times: “Today, it is just like that ...” or: “God acts precisely as in the time of Israel,” aiming to strengthen the identity of the Afrikaner nation as people who experienced precisely what Israel then had experienced; thus they could be reassured: God is (also) for us (cf Cilliers 1994).

But ... God does not fit into a pattern, nor one of absolute and unassailable certainty! Therefore, the biblical text, that testifies about the Wholly Different God, can speak about God in a contrasting, even “illogical” way without hesitation. In fact, in the Jewish philosophy (especially the so-called “midrash school”) they purposely avoided seeking one “meaning” of a text, rather a multiplicity of interpretations, thus allowing for “truths.” For example, Brueggemann (1995:316) points out that this possibly influenced Freud’s dream therapy, in which a wealth of interpretations of one dream was possible and even preferable. To read and to dream biblical texts apparently have much in common!

However, a biblical text does not expand our (stereotype) perspective in

a compulsory way, but rather questions the status quo in a subversive way by playfully, and enticingly suggesting other possibilities. This penetrates the typecast fixed formulae, the boredom of dead habits, the mere repetition of finished and undisputed truths that no longer are a threat or challenge to the listeners. The biblical text contests a diminution of its own inherent wealth, against adaptation and fitting it to the national moral of religious people, against a reduction to something that pious people can handle. To preach, is to listen to the many sounds of the text, to dance to the tune of the text. Too often we only want to play on our own (single) guitar and string!

4.1.1 ... OPENS DOORS TO NEW WORLDS ...

What are the implications of the above for preaching? As a first general rule, one could say: those who have discovered something of the nature of Scripture, have grasped something of its multidimensionality, could not but start to preach with (more) imagination (cf Cilliers 1994:585 ff; furthermore also chapter 6). The biblical text offers a strange, but salvific word, a word with an “abrasiveness” (Brueggemann 1989:7) that penetrates the one-dimensionality of our world to surprise, to provoke, reveal – with a view to entering a new world: accepting and living an evangelical alternative.

To preach is to present a biblical text and to point out the One of whom the biblical text testifies to the congregation in this way so that they can “see” the new world(s) of this God via the text. It is to attain a new imagination, a re-imagination of that which according to the text is, and thus also could be in our world, it is noticing, through the text’s magnifying glass (spectacles), things that you previously missed or regarded as unimportant.

Preaching is saying: the kingdom of God is like ...!

This “like” is an imaginative, creative like: it breaks down the dyed-in-the-wool comparisons with which we live, opposes the “like” of all ideologies and all –isms that bound us and still bind us, to point out other possibilities, and so simultaneously create possibilities for those who hear the “like” of the Word. To say “like” in preaching, is to unlock a gateway, to open it to God’s panorama, to remove the veils from the scene so that people can say anew: Aha!

This does not necessarily take place by presenting great, unique and universal truths to the congregation, rather in small doses – “breaking open” a particular text in each sermon within the specific context of the local congregation. A small text that offers a small view on God’s great panorama, a small “like” that is paradigmatic of the great “like” of the kingdom.

Each sermon is like (!) a small “window” of a bee’s many-lensed eye. Each window offers full vision, yet is not complete without the other windows – it is meaningful only within the greater totality of the picture. Or: preaching is to look at the text through its “view-master” together with the congregation. Every Sunday a new, surprising picture appears before our eyes, a picture that leaves us with shining eyes like children, full of joy and awe, but sometimes filled with sadness and humility

Preaching that raises *one* window or picture, raises one “like” to be the absolute truth, becomes isolated from God’s panorama, one-eyed, unimaginative. On the contrary, imaginative preaching offers a wealth of perspectives and, as such, contrasts our usual didactic, dogmatic or moralistic preaching (by the way: there is nothing as unimaginative as moralistic preaching – it offers only ourselves! How boring!). Imaginative preaching is like therapy: it accompanies the listener from the old, one-dimensional world to many, breathtaking scenes of the kingdom of God.

However, this cannot be emphasized enough: there is no way in which we can preach imaginatively without a fundamental and faithful communication and “work” with the biblical text. The (theological-scientific; prayerful and faithful) labour with the text is cleaning the spectacles, without which the view will be dim. However, by this I do not so much attain a “grip on the text,” but the God of the text acknowledges his grip on me; the text does not so much become a “scientific object” that I can dissect and analyse clinically, but I am led into a world in which also my own life is at issue. To be engaged with the biblical text is not just looking *at* the glasses of Scripture, but also *through* the glasses, ultimately, to be able to see the world *in front of* the glasses (biblical text) (Ricoeur). Sermons must not be merely “beautiful,” in the sense that they are “correct”; they must point out God to us in a surprising manner, far beyond what we could pray for, or think of

I reiterate: only those who remain close to the biblical text, who work relentlessly on it, attain the freedom to associate with it in an imaginative way. The one cannot do without the other; the one develops out of the other. One recalls Paderewski’s comment on geniality: “*Before I was a genius, I was a slug*” – the preacher must remain close to the text before he/she can produce its drama!

One recalls Karl Barth who had to address his last words to his students. Hitler banished him from Germany because he refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Führer, as he was of the opinion that it would damage his oath of faith in Christ. He had to leave the country within 24 hours and had but a few minutes for leave-taking from his students. His last words to them were: “*The most important thing that you must do is firstly: exegesis, secondly: exegesis and thirdly: again exegesis.*”

This brings us to:

4.2 The humanity of Scripture

The Bible is an entirely human word, i.e. a book like any other book, literature like any other literature. The Bible did not fall directly from heaven, and was not written by angels. On the contrary, it was written by humans, by a number of historically proven figures (and, if not historically proven, by people), who, with their own individuality and grammatical skills (or lack thereof), their characteristic styles of writing, choice of words and perceptions, left us the 66 books of the Bible. In these 66 books we also find a rich variety of genres, literary strategies and narrative developments. The Bible literally teems with true humanity and the writers' true creativity.

Because of this and, *inter alia*, because of the humanity of the perceptions and interpretation processes, quite a number of *apparent factual contradictions* are evident in the Bible (e.g. the often divergent ways in which the synoptical gospels report on the life, death and the resurrection of Jesus). At a first reading, it appears as though certain narratives just do not tally with other narratives on the same events. Does this mean that suspicion must be cast on the historical event *as event*? That the *factual reality* is undergirding of, for example, the Jesus narrative is involved? No, but indeed that the *interpretation processes* of these events and facts was done only by humans.

This further implies that the Bible – should we wish to read it in a responsible manner – should be studied with the assistance of historical and linguistic sciences. Sciences that, *inter alia*, examine the social backgrounds of the Bible (the so-called world *behind* the text), the literary nature of the text itself (the world *in* the text), as well as the history of the workings and interpretation of the text (the world *in front of* the text; for a summarized discussion, cf Smit 1987:26 ff).

The words of the Bible contain no magical power, as such. The Bible's letters do not glow in the dark. They are ordinary letters on paper, printed in ink, according to prescribed (human) printing processes. Stated more dogmatically: God's revelation is greater than the Bible, also precedes the Bible. The Bible is but the record of his revelation and humans wrote this record. In short: the Bible is not God or his revelation, and thus may not be shifted near to, or in the place of God to become an object of worship (the so-called Bibliolatry; for an extensive discussing of some of the ways in which Scripture already has been judged and interpreted, cf Vaessen 1997:36 ff).

However, there is something extremely liberating, yes, consoling in Scripture's human nature. *It underlines the fact that God speaks in human language.* That God does not roar his will to us universally over a large megaphone from heaven, but that He – literally and *by way of speaking* – has come and entered the brokenness of our human language. It is a miracle:

God speaks Greek and Hebrew, and ultimately also English and Afrikaans! God's voice is articulated and expressed in sound that I can also understand! In fact, we could say that the Word having become Scripture (the Bible) is as great a miracle as the Incarnate Word (Jesus). The *motive of the incarnation* (humanizing) also is fundamental to the book that we call the Bible. Those who understand something of this, stand anew in awe about the *condescending nature of God's revelation*.

Calvin often writes about God's adaptation to humans. This concerns the pedagogic motive for the economy of grace: we would not have known God if He did not stoop down to us and speak to us in such a human way that we could understand Him and could know that He is near to us. His Word does not fall from the sky in a secretive way, but comes to us in conceivable concepts, grammar and words (cf Berkouwer 1975:176). Because of the weakness of our ability, God speaks within the limits of our capacity: "*Because our weakness cannot reach his height, any description which we receive of Him must be lowered to our capacity in order to be intelligible. And the mode of lowering is to represent Him not as He really is, but as we conceive of Him*" (Calvin Inst. 1/17/13, also 1/11/3, 2/11/13, 2/16/2).

This is an awesome thought, because it implies that as you can look at Jesus and see all but God – rather a typical Jewish male – so you can also read the Bible and become aware of nothing but (a rich variety of) literature. To draw the parallel a bit further: there was no halo around the head of the Jesus, the Child, despite our Christmas cards. There was no heavenly glow in the stable that turned the straw into threads of gold and the dust into glitter. In the manger, lay a Child, kicking with his little bandy legs, nails to his fingers and toes, and tight little fists rubbing his small closed eyes. What was heard from the stable was no harp music, but the sound of a baby moaning (cf Cilliers 1991:37-38). Luther writes movingly: "*Jesus was no ghost, but lived among people; He had eyes, ears, a mouth, nose, chest, body, hands and feet, just like you and me, drank his mother's milk, ate and drank with us, became angry, prayed, grieved and wept.*"

The Bible must not – neither in preaching – be turned into a glittering Christmas card, nor into a book with golden, but inhuman, unreal words. For this, God's incarnating approach to us, yes, *his adaptation to us*, is too great. But, it is indeed *God* who adapts Himself to us

4.3 The Godliness of Scripture

The Bible is, comprehensively, a godly Word, i.e. different to any other book, and any other literature. This may sound like a complete contradiction, but must rather be called a miracle. Within the space of human language

we can hear God's Word! To return to the motive of the incarnation: the church fathers said about Christ: *vere deus et homo* (truly God and human), and we may also confess about Scripture: truly godly and human.

Therefore, we may not contend that only *certain* sections of the Bible are indeed God's Word, but *other* sections probably not. Rather that *all the words* in the Bible are simultaneously human and godly. The Bible was not written by angels, but by human beings, but they were inspired in a special way by the Holy Spirit (cf e.g. 2 Pet 1:20,21).

Therefore, in my opinion, we can and must adhere with as much conviction to the four classical characteristics that the church fathers formulated in respect of Scripture, namely that it has *authority*, that it is *crucial*, *clear* and *adequate*. That is, that the canon is closed, and that we should not seek for God's unique voice in extra-biblical sources (Berkouwer 1975:240 ff discusses these scriptural characteristics extensively).

The Bible need not be defended. This goes without saying. Although, in the light of the Bible's human nature, one could say much about the apparent factual contradictions in the text, but in the light of its godly nature, you would be able to say much more. For example, you could never stop talking about the Bible's history of transforming people. Thousands, no, millions of people could, in fact, testify that the message of the Bible has changed their lives profoundly. After all, that is the objective of the Word of God – it comes to transform us. Great church figures, such as Augustine, Luther and Barth, had a pertinent experience with God that emanated from specific scriptural pericopes – and the cloud of witnesses in this connection could, without doubt, increase vastly. Indeed, the Bible is an instrument in God's hand, part of the process by which He gathers, defends and supports his church by means of his Word and his Spirit (HC 21/54).

Therefore, not only does literary scientific method unlock the biblical message – no matter how important this may be – but most profoundly the internal witness of the Holy Spirit Himself does this (*testimonium spiritus sancti internum*). However, it is important to keep in mind that the one is not in opposition to the other. Should you place the scriptural human and godly characters in opposition, then you risk becoming unilateral, and then not hearing the unique voice of Scripture.

The wonderful, incomprehensible paradox remains: humans wrote the words of the Bible, yet, miraculously, they come to you as nothing but the Word of God. The biblical words do not glow in the dark, yet they can cast a (Godly) glow over you in your darkest hour!

Indeed: God's Word *incarnates* in human words – to *transform* us.

4.4 The unique message of Scripture

The Bible has a unique message. If one wants to hear anything but this message in the Bible, you are over-interpreting Scripture. The aim of the Bible, for example, is not to impart (exact historical or scientific) information on various issues. It is not a textbook for geology, cosmology, the medical sciences, physics, or you name it. For example, Origenes already warned that Genesis 1 does not intend to impart exact historical information on the precise, chronological origin of creation, but rather wishes to make a theological declaration: God, not the gods, created heaven and earth. Similarly, people such as Augustine and Calvin already pointed out that you cannot study astronomy from biblical data, not if you wanted to be a good astronomer. Why not? Because the Bible speaks in the language and context of certain times – in a human manner. Should you wish to deduce all kinds of information (or secret codes!) from the Bible, you may do this while being convinced that they are “scripturally reliable,” *but in reality, they are scripturally unreliable*, as you do not honour the unique character of Scripture. Then issues that are on the periphery are raised to the centre. Then the Bible is being overestimated. Then it is as though you – said with respect – try to make all kinds of inferences from a recipe book in an attempt to build a nuclear reactor! Such an approach misses the scriptural point.

And, what is this point? You probably could summarize it in many ways but, in my opinion, we hear something of this in 2 Timothy 3:15, when Paul advises Timothy: “... *and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” The holy Scriptures of which Paul speaks here, is not the whole canon as we know it today – then they were not yet assembled – but probably the Pentateuch and the book, Leviticus. Herein, says Paul, we already hear the message of salvation in Jesus Christ! This is the point, the heart of Scripture, and I apply it here also in a transferable sense, with regard to the Old and New Testament. In other words: the biblical message is *that of the salvific deeds of the Triune God, especially as is evident in Jesus Christ* (cf again 3.5.1.1). Therefore, Paul does not hesitate to say to the Corinthians: “*For I have resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*” (1 Cor 2:2).

We can appreciate these above-named four characteristics of the Bible only from this centre. The Bible has *authority*, but not in respect of astronomy, archaeology or physics, but indeed as regards this unique message: God is involved with human salvation. The Bible is *crucial*, because nowhere else in the world, not in any other book, does one find the message of God’s merciful involvement, but in the Bible. The Bible is *clear*, in a certain sense,

crystal-clear, not because it speaks faultlessly about issues such as medicine or nuclear power, but because it proclaims a message of salvation that, although multicoloured, is also simple, so simple that a child can understand it. Yes, even the blind can feel that events that are prophesied in the Bible, do take place (NGB 5). The fact that there often is such confusion about the meaning of the Bible, is more about our blinkers, our complexities, than about the simplicity of the Bible. We indeed need grace to (begin to) understand!

The Bible also is *adequate*, perfect. Nothing more is needed. God had his say in it. And the word from his heart is: *Because God so loved the world*

This message can be accepted only in faith. The object of the Bible is not merely that we are to analyze and dissect it as a linguistic or historical phenomenon – although, as previously said, this is not unimportant for an understanding of the message – but the object of the Bible is especially to be heard, obeyed and to be lived. Ultimately, it would have little meaning for a thirsty person to question the water of a well in the desert from a scientific angle (what archaeological strata did this phenomenon result from? Precisely how was the H₂O formed below the earth?)! Those who are thirsty must drink thereof – and live.

4.5 Implications for preaching

What does this have to do with the preaching of the Word? Herewith my preliminary conclusions:

- Preachers may never hide behind a certain view of the Bible as the “infallible Word of God” and use this as a shibboleth for being lazy. To preach is hard work (scientific, exegetical, linguistic, hermeneutic) on the text. But, in this sense, it is also a voyage of discovery; it presents the possibility to discover repeatedly new dimensions in the text, to examine new worlds. This would not be possible without the scientific work on the text as a human document. Preachers simply do miss much if they operate with a scriptural view that makes them hesitate to work truly with the text as a linguistic phenomenon – despite this hesitation originating from a certain respect for Scripture’s Godly nature.
- However, when working with Scripture, scientific methods may be so critical and destructive that preachers lose their trust therein, or their expectation that God’s voice may indeed speak from the folds of the text. Scientific methods are resources for promoting the hearing of the text’s message, not muzzles that stop the text’s mouth. To preach, one needs scientific methods, but you do not preach scientific methods.

- Preachers must focus on the central, unique message of Scripture and not allow themselves to become occupied with various (skilful) arguments about bordering issues. In fact, the awful possibility exists that an excessive interest in bordering issues may be an (unconscious) attempt to conceal your embarrassment about the scandal of the central message. It is possible that preachers, while in an eloquent and glowing debate about bordering phenomena in specific texts, could do and think precisely the opposite of what the text's central message demands. Therefore, preachers must be especially wary of not allowing the Bible's central message (i.e. that God mercifully saves humans) to obstruct their sermon's content or style. Alas, preachers often speak as though God is not a liberating, real Presence, as though He is not the One who was, who is and who will come (cf 3.7 for examples).
- Because the Bible is a book in which God Himself speaks in human words, preaching of this Word is not the mere transmission of information about salvation, but part of God's liberating act. The Word – and thus also preaching – does not merely *inform*, but *performs*. Calvin's well-known declaration is that Christ's blood drips on the listeners while the preacher speaks and that the gateway of paradise then opens before them. Something of the wonder of the Word who became Scripture, yes, also the incarnate Word, permeates preaching: the reality of God's Words resonate in the reality of human words. Herein lies the hope of preaching (cf 2.3).
- In short: therefore, preachers must honour Scripture wholly as a human and godly document. Interestingly, research proved that moralistic preaching, in fact, separates this connection. In fact, some of the typical characteristics of moralism are either a dehistoricization of the text (i.e. dealing with the Bible as though it is a timeless collection of words from heaven) with concomitant phenomena such as allegory; or, in fact, anthropologizing the core message, yes, the *theology* of Scripture, viz. the merciful acts of God, and changing them into moral appeals for self-improvement (cf Greidanus 1970:85-86). Instead of the Gospel, it offers a list for controlling inner, religious evaluation. But, this is no consolation to anybody, not in life, nor in death (cf also 4.7 for examples of the moralistic misuse of Scripture).

From all this, it becomes clear once again: Scripture is a treasure that the Lord of the church gave to us. It contains words that impart life. The Spirit works through it. Should we want to be, or become, preachers, yes, if we wish to understand something of the mystery of preaching, then we must learn to *listen* truly to this Scripture

4.6 The secret of preaching: Listening to the voice of the text

4.6.1 DRUNK WITH CONSOLATION ...

A single comma from the Bible – sometimes this is all that is necessary to turn one's life, and the course of church history, into a new direction, as in the case of Herman Kohlbrügge. It is a well-known fact that he experienced a "second conversion" during a discovery that he made in Romans 7:14, where the placing of a comma¹⁶ gave him the insight that even the reborn person has nothing to boast about, and that sanctification is also a gift from God. He writes that this comma made him "drunk of consolation" and also: *"I do not know whether anything in my life ever stirred me as when I saw this comma."* This insight (that he received on 29 July 1833) resulted in a significant sermon, delivered on 31 July 1833 in Wuppertal (cf Hesse 1935:151).

When drunk from consolation, one cannot but preach about it. But then one must first drink deeply of the new wine of the text. You must take note of each movement, each intonation, and each punctuation of the text. You must first hold "the Word against the light," until the Spirit makes its essentiality transparent to you. This is a fixed point of departure for preaching that, because of its importance, has now already been reiterated several times in this book: if one does not work with the text, then one has nothing to say in preaching. Or, in Karl Barth's words (1964:89): *"There is, therefore, nothing to be said which is not already to be found in the Scriptures."*

4.6.2 AN "UNPREACHED BIBLE"?

The above-named point of departure could also be reversed: if the voice of the text is not heard in the sermon, then it is no preaching: *"Sermons not informed and inspired by Scripture are objects dislodged, orphans in the world, without mother or father"* (Craddock 1985:27).

How many sermons, in fact, are preached and heard that are orphans-without-text, is an open question. An alarming percentage of the current

16 The comma is in the Greek text that Kohlbrügge consulted, after the word "fleshly/carnal/unspiritual." In the NIV the text is as follows: *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.* In fact, for Kohlbrügge, this obituary (*"I am unspiritual"*) was the good news of the Gospel, especially also for the (already) reborn person. Because I am unspiritual and sold to sin, only God in Christ can sanctify me. This emphasis on the objective salvific facts in Christ, one encounters throughout Kohlbrügge's theology (cf De Jong 1972:323; also Aalders 1976:79 ff).

preaching in South Africa (in any case in respect of preaching over the radio, cf Cilliers 1996:11) could be typified as textless sermons. Naturally, the question is: What exactly is scriptural preaching? What constitutes preaching that is “true to Scripture”? What are its characteristics? Often, there are divergent opinions about this.

It is worthwhile to heed Karl Barth’s comments (1964:89-92) in this respect. He distinguishes five characteristics of preachers who wish to anchor their sermons in Scripture. Adapted and abbreviated, they read as follows:

- Firstly, put your *trust in Scripture*, i.e. be convinced that Scripture has enough to offer and that you need not seek elsewhere for answers to our life’s questions. Should you repeatedly wish to add various “practical instructions,” then your trust in Scripture is lacking.
- Secondly, *respect Scripture*, in the sense that you read it expecting that, indeed, herein you will find the answers to our vital questions. To read Scripture so, is like being a person who reads slowly and apparently with difficulty, who mutters while spelling out the words, who is all eyes, who stands in awe about the discoveries that one makes.
- Thirdly, *read Scripture with concentrated and conscientious attention* to find its meaning. This conscientious reading includes exegetical, historical and linguistical work on the text, but also a search for its theology, for the nucleus of grace, for “God’s message for society.”
- Fourthly, *allow your own preconceived ideas to be corrected repeatedly by the text*, because there is a tendency in our blood: to stencil our favourite theological constructions, or our ideologies, subtly or blatantly, onto each text. Then, each text must ventriloquize our perception of evangelization, mission, or political justice, *ad nauseum*.
- Fifthly, *allow yourself to be moved by the movement of God’s Word*. The Bible was not intended for mere cognitive knowledge, but invites one to experience inspiration by the Spirit. We, indeed, do not have the text as a lifeless letter; the Spirit works through it, blows through it – so that we may repeatedly ask: What does the living God say to me though this text?

We probably have to distinguish between various scripturally oriented or based levels. For example, there are sermons that can cite many texts (often for the sound), but not necessary “unlock” them in the proclamation. There are sermons that deal with the biblical text in a derivative way, i.e. they do not literally quote the text, but are yet permeated with its philosophical content. In these sermons the text is no longer recognizable as such, but we could, however, say that the “message” is still there, and that

the umbilical chord between text and sermon has not yet been cut. There are sermons that can work with a strong exegesis of a text, but do not succeed in crossing the bridge to a congregational context, that is: *to translate the text conceivably as the gospel for that time*. There are sermons that could be called “expository preaching,” in which a verse-by-verse exegesis of a pericope of Scripture takes place, without a focused search for “applications,” or in which applications are added after the exegesis, as a kind of slick addendum. There are also sermons that purport to use the text as a basis, but the text functions all but profoundly in these sermons and, in fact, the biblical text is *optional and exchangeable* – mere décor for some or other spiritual “message.” Such sermons may well be called “Christian” in the theoretical sense of the word, but they miss the specific thrust and unique “taste” of a specific text. It certainly is clear that “true scriptural preaching” is a complex issue. That the text still indeed breaks through all the obstacles at particular moments, yes, that the text, as it were, takes revenge on, and in, our clumsiness, is nothing but a Divine miracle.

In any case, it is clear: *there are few things that so shape – and reshape! – a sermon, as the preacher’s perception of Scripture*. At the very least, one must acknowledge that the text has a voice, as well as something to say; you must believe that the biblical text cannot be exhausted and diminished by use, or that the historical distance between text and reader becomes greater. After all, the Bible is not merely the Word of God in its first premise, but in every repetition thereof. Repetition of it does not weaken it in some or other way to thus become less and less God’s Word (Calvin). It always retains its razor-sharp voice, sharper than any double-edged sword that penetrates even the separation between soul and spirit and between marrow and joints (Heb 4:12). It is the charter of our salvation and offers the “mother’s tongue” for preaching salvation and life from salvation. If this mother feeds one, then you cannot produce orphans on the pulpit.

It appears as though preaching, indeed, is in danger of no longer being scriptural preaching. There are many sections of the Bible whose voices are never, or seldom, heard. The Bible apparently, to a large extent, is an unpreached Bible (“*ungepredigte Bibel*”, Bohren 1996:92-94, also 1971:110 ff). The great influence of moralism that still affects preaching in South Africa is, inter alia, a symptom of the fact that preachers deviate too soon from the text, or perhaps have never truly visited the text (cf Cilliers 1996:13,24). It is almost a set rule: those who depart from the text, mostly seek rapid and viable schemes; they follow the route of the least resistance, thus shooting the preaching of the text, yes the gospel of the text, in the foot.

We have been called always to “adhere to the text” and therefore, in our preaching haste, to slow down – en route to, and en route from, the text –

to stay with the text, to visit in it, until it feels like your own home. To communicate so with the text, that it remains with you on your way, “lingers” with you, not as a smoothly stroked cliché, but as the strange, subversive Word of God; that keeps turning around in you long after you have closed the Bible (cf Brueggemann 1989:7-11). We have been called to visit and revisit the text, to chew and taste, also “rechew and retaste” it. If you do not want to spend time with the text, and meditate on it day and night (Ps 1:2!), then you should neither waste others’ time on – and below – the pulpit.

To spend time with the text, to rechew it, was, for instance, of vital importance for Luther. He latches onto the biblical metaphor of eating and ingesting the Word (cf e.g. Am 8:11; Ps 19:11; Rev 10:10; also Bohren 1986:75 ff) and calls the process of rechewing “the essence of true meditation.” Meditation is reading and rereading Scripture, to rechew the Word in one’s heart (*meditari proprie est ruminare in corde*). Thus the heart, as it were, becomes the stomach of the human spirit.

In this act of meditation, the intellect and the emotion are joined to understand and digest the Word. Rechewing is not merely a cognitive issue, but also ingesting the Word with emotion (*cum affecto*). The repetition and rechewing of the Word, arouses a feeling for God. For Luther, this process naturally is also Christologically determined: Jesus’ whole life and suffering must be taken into the heart and be rechewed bit by bit day and night – almost like a sacramental act – so that one’s heart can be warmed and one can receive power and sustenance (sweetness). Thus, meditation is a coin with two sides: we enter the text, and the text enters us.

Luther could express this in a practical way: in the evening, it is useful to carry a text into the night with you, to rechew it in your heart, so that you can receive it in the morning as an inheritance from the night, and can taste it in the light of a new day’s grace. Sometimes, it is necessary to ponder and rechew an entire psalm or a single verse of a psalm for a day or a week, until it has been absorbed in your fibres and thus becomes part of your existence. In short, if you do not eat the Word, then you cannot feed others with it (cf Meuser 1983:88).

The preacher’s spirituality thus is not apparent only from *prayer* in general (cf also chapter 6), but also from *the way in which prayer is brought into relation with an association with Scripture*. If you want to read a biblical text without obligation, or merely as a practice to attain (sermonic) information, then you do not understand what meditation is. Those who want to read the text must come prepared as though for a picnic, for sitting down to a meal, with the expectation of being sated. Or: those who want to read the text must be open to its “emotion,” the mood (cf also 4.6.4) – and this is not about sentimentality. Those who want to read the text must be pre-

pared to shed tears over it, complain with its litany, but must also be prepared to dance with it to its rhythm, to its melody. Those who want to read the text must, in any case, know: *in this text I die and I live*.

The atmosphere and style, the meaningfulness and “aura” of the biblical text must permeate and penetrate every word and act, every silence and movement, in short, every moment and part of the sermon and worship service like water filling a sponge. For example, if one reads Psalm 130, then you may only do so as though you are someone calling from the depths to God, so that the reading – and sermon – becomes a voice from the depths, a voice that sounds so amidst the congregation that they, and especially those in the depths, can identify with it. Or, if one reads and preaches on Psalm 88, then one can hardly do so without knowing what it is to hesitate on the edge of the grave. Or, if one preaches about Psalm 100, and you have not experienced how God’s steadfastness can fill you to a bursting point with joy and more joy, then you should rather have remained silent.

The point is: the sermon and the worship service may not crucify the biblical text; the biblical text must cross through the sermon and the worship service. What is needed are Crossed-through sermons and worship services (Bohren). Especially also the liturgists’ style, their personal approach and individuality, even their intonation, body language and mannerisms in service of the biblical text’s style, become part of pointing God out from the pulpit, pointing out the Crucified who takes away the sins of the world

However, now the question is:

4.6.3 HOW DO PREACHERS READ THE BIBLE?

As the Reformed, we confess: *sola scriptura*, and in addition also: *tota scriptura* (only the Word, the whole Word). How much of this is justified in the process of preparing sermons, is another question. Already at the first level, the question becomes crucial: How do preachers read the Bible? Augustine commented that *continuous reading and rereading of Scripture, until it permeates you, is one of the primary callings of preachers* (cf Van Oort 1991:15, also 1989:26). In fact, according to him, this forms an indispensable condition for the entire ministry. This *lectio divina* is the first, “naive” and daily reading of Scripture, until you are familiar with the greater lines, the comprehensive story of God’s actions with humans. Already early on, Augustine noticed a basic problem: there are too many preachers who want to peck at texts, like chickens peck up grain, here and there, without a feeling for the yard’s space, or the Great Narrative. The use of a *reading schedule* indeed has the advantage that it, at least, eliminates this arbitrariness.

ness, but also has other disadvantages (for a critical discussion, cf Van der Walt & Du Toit 1999:112-119).

Homiletically (and re faith!), a disciplined reading of the Bible is not negotiable. It cannot be avoided. You will start nowhere if you do not start somewhere. A naive reading of the Bible precedes the exegetical work, and must, as it were, create the bed in which the exegetical work and, in fact, the entire process of preparing a sermon can take place. According to Bohren (1996:85) Scripture attains its voice in the reading thereof, and this voice, in a sense, again forms the presupposition and purpose of the theological work. In this reading process we must trust the power of Scripture to speak its way open to us. Scripture has its own rhythm, its own pulsating energy. To apply a contemporary image: texts are like waves that break, and readers and preachers must learn, like good surfers, to come into the momentum of the waves, to ride the crests. Not only the experienced surfers/preachers will attest to the fact that this is no easy art. Often multiple plunges are necessary before you find your feet on the surfboard/pulpit!

The point of departure is: Scripture has its own working and clarity, not only in reading it privately, but also when reading it in a worship service. According to Augustine the latter already is proclamation of salvation – without any preaching comment being added. This may sound obvious, yet the principal question remains: How do preachers read the Bible – if ever? DL Moody's comment to members could inspire preachers to reconsider their reading habits: *Read your Bible to pieces*

It is a fact: you cannot preach if you do not read. Neither can you preach if you do not listen. This reading-and-listening process demands all your senses – eyes, ears, touch, smell, taste, heart, intellect and imagination (cf Bugg 1992:68-76). Those who truly read, enter a new world, a world in which you observe with sharpened senses; yes, in which you taste that the Lord is good (cf 1 Pet 2:3). Reading the text is the gateway to the alternative worlds of the text, thus the Gospel itself.

4.6.4 THE GENRE OF THE TEXT: THE SOURCE FOR CREATIVE PREACHING

However, the question about the function of the text in the process of preparing a sermon is crucial also at a second level. Usually, preachers search for the “message” of the text for preaching. This is good on condition that we understand that one cannot abstract the message or the content from the text's form. Eugene Peterson (1995:117) speaks of “contemplative exegesis” and describes it thus: *“Contemplative exegesis means listening to the word as sound, the word that reveals out of one's interior; it also means*

receiving the words in the form in which they were given. For the way in which words are spoken is as important as what the words say." Actually, you cannot preach on a "theme" from a text, as the latter is not like an orange that one sucks for its juice (content), and then discards the peel (form). No, the form is an offer; as the written, creative shaping, it is the source for creative shaping in preaching.

Here, historical-critical research and literary science is valuable: it helps us to focus better on the surprising turns, the nuances and movements of the text and to implement them for preaching. Although these sciences may never usurp the responsibility of meditating on the text, a preacher cannot do without them with a good conscience. This does not mean that every available method must be managed, or that all hypotheses must be accepted as such, but that, indeed, they have potential that can be critically cultivated (cf Bohren 1971:77 ff).

All of this reconfirms that we cannot be serious enough about a biblical text. *The text demands our listening to it with rapt attention, that we study it, wrestle with it ... broken, crippled, saturated with prayer ... into the night.* After all, the message of hope embedded therein constantly calls to be discovered and developed. The art of preaching lies in retelling, further relating the message of hope (cf 3.5.1.4), and this results in no other way but from constant commitment and work on the text. The text, through which the Spirit works, in a sense, is all that we have. But it's enough.

This constant commitment to, and listening to the text, means that we not only will listen *to* the text, but also that we, as it were, will enter *into* the text, to enable us to see God's new world *through* the text. *"Preachers must not only see into the text and try to enter it; they must also learn to look through the text to the world that expands before the text. They must learn to see another world, an alternative world, God's totally different world, God's hope-giving saving of, and caring for, the world ... thus, looking through the text brings worlds together: God's world and our world"* (Müller, translated and quoted in Cilliers 1998:1). This process will have to include, at least, six issues:

- To adhere to the *fundamental code* of the text in preaching (e.g., not changing the *Beatitudes* into a list of *admonishments*!). There are always certain codes in the text, such as metaphors, symbolism and verbal forms that must not be disregarded. To mention but one example of a verbal form: it often happens in preaching that the proclamation of salvific facts are subtly changed into salvific possibilities, that the past tense becomes a futurum – that, as a law, should be fulfilled by humans. Then the listeners are expected to act in such a way that salvific possibilities are changed into salvific facts. This eliminates the Gospel's con-

solation. Therefore, we must repeatedly and meticulously examine the text, repeatedly note the most subtle particulars in order to promote fully the hope that is submerged under such surprising twists.

- In preaching, to note the role of *metaphorical language as a redescription of reality*, instead of a mere moralistic ethicalization thereof. Herein the scriptural metaphors present a powerful example – consider the moving metaphors that the prophets pronounced over Israel in order to create a new dream, a new vision for them. But, another example: when Ezekiel (37:1-14) told the people about his vision of dry bones that became alive, this was filled with the hope of a new beginning, a genuine transformation brought about by the Spirit of the Lord Himself. How we South Africans long for such hope-inspiring metaphors!
- In preaching, to pay attention to the *direction or trajectory* of the text, i.e. also to execute in preaching the objective or intention of the text. This focus on the *intentional movement* of biblical texts, means repeatedly asking: Where does this text want to go? What does it want to do and achieve? After all, the text moves in a certain direction and wants to elicit a certain event. The rhetorical movement within the text, as well as the movement of the text within the community that hears it, generates meaning – hope. For we may believe this: the most profound objective of biblical texts is *to inspire hope*. It is to transform humans – God’s people, even if the text speaks of sin or of God’s judgement. Ultimately, the text wishes to console us with the Gospel’s salvation, despite these consoling words adopting differing images, and displaying a variety of faces. In this lies the text’s *theological centre of gravity*. The art of preaching, indeed, is finding the particular theological consoling meaning of the text, and transmitting this repeatedly as faithfully and as creatively as possible.
- In preaching, to be serious about the *sociological reading of the biblical text*, i.e. about its particular historical, literary, geographical and socio-economic context (*Sitz im Leben*). Biblical texts did not fall from heaven, but have a specific past. That moralism almost always wants to jump over the historicity of biblical texts to reach some or other abstracted “spiritual truth” or “law” is significant. In fact, moralism preys on the dehistoricization and spiritualization of Scripture – and the resultant exemplary handling thereof (cf Cilliers 1996:25 ff; also 4.7). However, if one does not treat the past of the text with honesty, then you will not understand its present and future.
- To develop an *imaginative anticipation* in preaching as regards the “application possibilities” of the text, rather than a dry, sterile application, i.e. to note and promote the points of contact between the text and the readers and to read the text with an *attitude of expectation* so that

even the apparently best-known or most uninteresting part of the text contains a fresh word of grace for preaching (cf Wilson & Gaventa 1998:397-401). The atmosphere of expectation is the breeding ground of miracles! The text indeed holds the promise of a new future – a promise of God’s surprising grace. In this sense, hopeful preachers are creative preachers, i.e. people who live *só* in the world of the text, but also *só* in the human world, that they can create new links, surprising associations that result in new possibilities becoming visible, where none previously were to be seen (cf Cilliers 1998:97 ff). However, creative preachers also know that they cannot preach without the creative Spirit and, therefore, pray: *veni Creator Spiritus* (come Creator-Spirit) (cf Cilliers 2000:121-122).

An understanding of the past, present and future worlds of the text helps us to grasp the full meaning of the text (for Ricoeur’s contributions in this respect, cf Vos 1996:58-78; also Dirkie Smit’s clear exposition 1987). However, as previously stated, these research methodologies may never be regarded as the objectives, or result in preachers’ cynicism about the text to the extent that they lose their inspiration for preaching. Augustine’s old wisdom perhaps is appropriate again: the associated sciences may indeed be applied (*uti*), but only the Gospel may be enjoyed (*frui*) (Van Oort 1989:8)!

To mention but a single example from the oeuvre of linguistic science: now, homiletes are understanding more and more that there is a clear link between the *literary genre* of the text and preaching. Those who are sensitive to the genre of the text, ask other kinds of questions about the text, approach it with another kind of expectation that merely would have been in the case of a clinical search for the “message” of the text. Long’s comments (1996:127-135) are characteristic of such a more extensive approach:

- Allow the movement of the biblical text to determine the movement of the sermon
- Allow the opposing powers of the biblical text to become the opposing powers of the sermon
- Allow the central insight of the biblical text to be the central insight of the sermon, and
- Allow the mood of the biblical text to affect the mood of the sermon.

This approach to Scripture differs widely from that of fundamentalism. The latter disregards, to a great extent, *inter alia*, the historical and linguistic nature of Scripture – with far-reaching results for preaching. *In fact, few things smother the creative style in preaching as much as fundamentalism.*

Those who do not acknowledge the unique historical and literary nature of the text (may I add: its human nature) and too readily seek for “timeless truths” that might be concealed in the text in some or other way, in my opinion, do not understand the meaning of *sola scriptura* and *tota scriptura*. Texts are full of rhetorical and communication strategies, full of narrative surprises that wait to be developed, also in preaching. Such an approach is entirely different to applying a fixed scheme into every sermon, so that the congregation eventually already knows what will follow (“I already know what the minister will say before he/she says it”). In fact, some preachers explicitly sabotage the surprises of the text and sermon: they tell the congregation what they will do (three points!), then they do it, and then, in summary, they reiterate what they said they will do, and did (or they repeat it in the prayer). No wonder that sermons and boredom have become synonymous for many.

No, boredom must stop. In fact, if one Christian intolerance exists then it is against boredom (Bohren 1971:404). To read biblical texts and to preach about them is exciting, a voyage of discovery, the joy of discovery (Barth). It is music to our ears. According to Mike Graves (1997:10), to prepare a sermon is literally like being a composer and a conductor! The challenge is not merely passing on information or a moral lesson from a scriptural pericope, but rather: “*to communicate the experience of a passage. This kind of preaching, like a touching piece of music, comes through the gut more than through the mind.*” According to Graves, for this, preachers must honour the genre of the text; they must listen carefully to the text, to its mood and movement (cf also Buttrick 1987). The mood is the emotion (“*state of mind or feelings*”) that the text evokes in us, and the movement is the progression, structural pattern and philosophical segmentation of the text (Graves 1997:12). Like a composer, the preacher must seek the best music to execute the text, and as a conductor, the preacher must then perform it on stage with the most appropriate instruments. As composer-conductor, the preacher must search for words and images that do justice to the scriptural words and images, at least according to the preacher’s interpretation. The preacher chooses a particular composition and chooses dynamics in words and tone of voice (Graves 1997:18 ff).

4.6.5 BIBLICAL TEXTS: WINDOWS TO GOD’S FACE

However, the composer-conductor’s technique may never become the objective! Neither are biblical texts rhetorically touching or literarily beautiful for the sake of their artistry. Biblical texts tell God’s story and, as such, focus on his revelation. The point is: in your voyage of discovery through the world of the text, in its texture and fibres (*texere*), you have an oppor-

tunity to hear the living voice of the Gospel, the *viva vox evangelii*. Embedded in the text you can find and follow the footprints of the Spirit, yes, God's footprints. Every text opens new worlds, surprising possibilities, unknown promises, namely those of the *Gospel*. Biblical texts are inviting. They spell out the Gospel, invite us to a world in which we can see how God works. As the Gospel, it simultaneously spells out liberation to a new way of life. In more general terms: the text proclaims the *indicative as imperative, and the imperative as indicative*. The secret of preaching is to discover this and to share it with the congregation (cf Cilliers 2000:21-33).

Therefore, fundamental to preaching is the question: What is a (biblical) text? We could say: each text is a window that opens a unique vision of God's face. Even more: each text is a multiplicity of windows, a kaleidoscope of insights, of new perspectives onto God's face. As already emphasized, texts, as such, contain more than one truth about God; more than a single interpretation, therefore, this is not only possible, but preferable. If one reads a text with the view to distilling a single, "eternal truth" from it, you run the risk of diminishing and ultimately spoiling the text. If you are satisfied to discover but one diamond in the digger's sieve of exegetical work, then you have not dug deep enough in the mine of the text. Or, if you just continue staring at one side of the diamond, and do not continue turning it around in preaching, you will never experience all of its sparkle. You can hold the treasure in your hand without understanding its wealth. *Similarly, apparently, a good text in the hands of bad people can become a bad text, and a bad text in the hands of good people a good text* (Rabbi Tzvi Marx).¹⁷

The calling of preachers is to mediate repeatedly a new side of God's face, a new perspective on his merciful presence to the congregation. However, this is impossible without looking through scriptural glasses. Only when the scriptural lens, the specific lens of a specific text focuses our eyes on a specific revelation of God, can we, as preachers, invite others to look through the lens with us. In fact, the meaning of preaching is indeed, as a congregation, to attain a new perspective on God and, therefore, also on ourselves and on the world in which we find ourselves (cf chapter 3).

This perspective is exactly: a perspective, an angle of vision, a view from where you stand. Thus, It cannot but be contextual, neither can it but be experimental, in the sense that you always know that other perspectives, other interpretations of this revelation of God are possible. Therefore, each perspective, each sermon, in fact, is limited, and must not pretend to present the full picture of the whole truth to the congregation. Sermons are piecework, fragments, and, as such, they are open invitations for oth-

17 In an unpublished paper read at the conference of the *Societas Homiletica* in Doorn, the Netherlands (16-21 June 2001).

ers also to take the liberty of articulating their perspectives through the lens of the text. *Sermons are subject to an eschatological reservation*: for we know but in part and proclaim God's will but in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears (1 Cor 13:9,10).

However, the miracle remains: God reveals his face to us. He speaks via the living voice of the text – enough to intoxicate one with consolation!

4.6.6 BIBLICAL TEXTS: BRIDGES THAT CONNECT WORLDS

Allow us, once again, to spell out the implications of what has been said in this chapter thusfar, but from another angle. For a very long time preaching has been described traditionally as a movement “from text to sermon” (for literature, as well as critique thereupon, cf Bohren 1974:143 ff). The basic philosophy about this was simple, superficially, approximately as follows: between the antique biblical text and the present listener or reader there is a centuries-old chasm that preachers must bridge as well as possible. This they do by determining the *central message or theme* of the text by means of the correct exegesis, and pass it to the listener with the least possible interference, and, in the process, also supply an appropriate application. Often this *applicatio* was nothing but a forced *analogy* between historical and contemporary situations, in the vein of: “*We are only like Peter of old, not so?*” Or: “*Today we still wrestle just like Paul against the enemies of the Gospel.*” But, despite all the continuities that might exist between certain historical situations, it is clear that there are many more discontinuities, at least as striking or significant as the continuities. The course of history is not only according to *stringent* lines, but also according to *contingent* interruptions. We are not “just like” Peter, and do not wrestle “just like” Paul against the enemies of the Gospel. For this, the chasms of time, culture and context are simply too great (cf Cilliers 1994:19 ff; also 4.8).

What makes the above manner of preaching even more doubtful is the usual stereotype moralistic concomitant supplementation. Then the sermon becomes a timeless three-step practice, a stereotype exposition of principle, application and, naturally, admonition (cf Cilliers 1996:98). Something like:

- The text of today says to us ... (reduction of the text's meaning to a general principle or truth)
- Applied to our situation, this means ... (prescriptive application of the truth onto human lives)
- Therefore, we should/must ... (admonition for new action).

Yet, this paradigm was adhered to for a long time. In it the preacher had

to, as it were, dive like a scuba-diver deeply under the waters of history to find the precious coral (or moral lesson!) in order to bring it as unscathed as possible out of the water to present it in the waiting recipients' hands (Croatto 1987:66). Or, like a surgeon who had to operate on the text with sterile gloves (correct exegesis, historical-critical methods, etc.) to penetrate to the core of the truth (Long 1990:342; also Peterson 1995:107 ff). Texts were approached as though they were sealed containers that were to be cracked open to reach the concealed mysterious diamond.

However, this point of departure was increasingly fired upon for a whole series of reasons. I mention but three (in association with Long 1990:342-343):

- *Firstly*: For a long time, there has been no consensus among biblical scientists about what would be the only, or legitimate, interpretation model! On the contrary, sometimes the philosophical directions in this connection are directly opposite. Currently, a conglomerate of interpretation methodologies is evident on the hermeneutical horizon, for example, those of feminism, liberalism, postliberalism, postmodernism, reception-aesthetics, etc. Without doubt, this change in the hermeneutical scheme has a drastic influence on preaching: the road "from text to sermon" is no longer as well-known and brightly lit as previously presumed.
- *Secondly*: That the historical-critical methodology, in fact, all methodologies are not, or cannot be, neutral is becoming increasingly acceptable, but they arise from certain ideological presuppositions in connection with the nature of meaning. Then the sterile gloves were not so sterile. However, this does not mean that the preacher can manage without a thorough, scientific association with the text and, as it were, can venture a surgical grasp of the text without gloves, or worse, with septic gloves. According to Eugene Peterson (1995:109-110) a preacher who operates on the text with such septic gloves (suspect methods, a lack of methodologies, simply exegetical laziness), just as certainly should be summoned as when a medical doctor would risk operating thus on a patient! It is the challenge, the tension of exegesis: the gloves are never sterile, but also may never be septic!
- *Thirdly*: The view of what Scripture is, and how it functions, has changed. Together with the shift in hermeneutical paradigms, an inevitable shift in scriptural perception has taken place. It is a fact that must be carefully judged, because these shifts naturally did not bring only undiluted blessing. However, in my opinion, the greatest advantage of these shifts actually is the fact that a new interest in the premise of the biblical text arose, a rediscovery of the possibilities and limitations, indeed

also insofar as it concerns preaching. In the old paradigm of the movement from “text to sermon” the text – contra to the aim of preachers – came off second best. While *elements or pieces* of the text (a “message,” ideas, themes) were carried over the bridge, the *text itself* remained behind, i.e. the text with its literary fibres, full of rhetorical turns and strategies, but also in its defiance, its irregularity. Brueggemann (1989:7) probably is right when he says that we have tamed, reduced and trivialized the text to a great extent. While “beautiful” and often also moralistic messages by way of unnatural historical analogies were carried over the chasm, the text remained behind without having had the opportunity to speak *as text*. During the attempt to squeeze the juice (content) out of the orange (text), the peel (style) was left behind – to the detriment of preaching (Long 1996:127 ff).

Preachers’ scriptural perceptions undoubtedly have decisive implications for their preaching. Whether preachers explicitly articulate this fact and preach from this conviction, or whether it lies more implicitly behind their preaching, this connection exists and usually is evident in their preaching. An analysis of concrete sermons usually reveals which scriptural perceptions in these sermons are, or are not, virulent (for concrete examples, cf Cilliers 1998:59 ff and 2000:56 ff; also 4.7).

4.7 Examples of sermons based on a failed (moralistic) listening to Scripture

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12). Thus, Scripture defines the nature, work and power of the Word. Scripture contains the Word of God, is the medium through which the Person of the speaking God becomes an issue. The secret of this is the Holy Spirit. He turns the scriptural letters into living words, words that, over centuries, have established, protected and supported the church of all times. The Spirit allows the Scriptures to work, turns it into a unique Book, different to any other book in history. Exactly for this reason the Reformers could – as emphasized in 4.3 above – speak, inter alia, of the authority, urgency, clarity and adequacy of Scripture. It contains all that is necessary for us to attain knowledge of the truth and salvation, and truly expresses this. Scripture has a *performative* character.

To pause for a moment with this concept is important. Originally, John L Austin (1972:125 ff) used this when distinguishing descriptive and per-

formative speech. He defines descriptive speech as typically that of the objective observer, as consequences that could be valid for all circumstances, purposes and listeners. It represents a general description that would not necessarily apply to these listeners *now*. On the contrary, there is the performative form of speech that Austin illustrates in respect of the sacrament of baptism during which the preacher, as administrator of the baptism, says: "I baptise you in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." In this declaration, the preacher not only "says," but exercises the baptismal sacrament. Or, when the judge says: "I herewith declare you guilty in the name of justice," he not so much speaks about the characteristics of guilt and justice, but rather expresses it. The judge's word brings either judgement or exoneration.

According to Austin, the present, indicative, active form of speech best illustrates the performative style of speaking (e.g. "God is working"), although this form may not be generalized and can be supplemented with examples that are not formally present in the indicative active form. Yet, seen in the context of an entire text structure, the performative form remains a good indication of a speaker's expression of the presence and actions of the authority or person who is being discussed – in the case of preaching, God.

God's declarations adopt various images, but are always an expression of the one Gospel. Sometimes the emphasis falls on the revelation of our sins, when the Gospel comes to us as the law that drives us to Christ (law as *usus elenchticus*); sometimes the emphasis falls on the gratitude to which we are called when the Gospel comes to us as a commandment or imperative, or a concrete guideline for obedience (law as *tertius usus*). However, it always remains nothing but the *Gospel* that comes to us. The revelatory and imperative images of the Word are *at home in the house of the Gospel*. Therein lies the Word's promising character (*promissio*): this tells the story(-ies) of God's great deeds which also include the (response of the) human being.

As already explained, these basic Reformatory perspectives on Scripture do not exclude the fact that Scripture simultaneously is a true historical document that, in terms of time, is far distant from us. Scripture's uniqueness, indeed, lies therein that it simultaneously is theological and historical by nature; that it contains God's Word for all times and thus also for our (post)modern times, while it mostly originated during the iron age! However, in this uniqueness of Scripture lies also the dilemma (challenge!) of preaching. From this arises the fundamental hermeneutical question: How must the distance between then and now be bridged? Or, as often articulated in sermons: "*What does this text mean to us today?*"

That this inherent tension could easily tempt preachers to provide legal-

istic solutions, is extremely evident when one examines sermons analytically. There are various attempts to cross the bridge between history and today (“also for us today”), with far-reaching consequences for the theological quality of the sermons.

4.7.1 HISTORICAL ANALOGIES

The first method to which I briefly referred in 4.6.6, is evident and is practised with various measures of finesse. It consists of searching for analogues between the time in which the biblical text originated that also influenced the biblical text, and the listeners’ contemporary time; the propounding of agreements, identifications, comparisons and examples to serve as consolation and an appeal for the present. The point of departure is that the actuality of the Word depends on, or at least goes with the possible coinciding of historical events.

The use of analogues in preaching naturally has a certain right. However, it must be done throughout in a theologically responsible way. For example, Greidanus (1970:85-86) points out how easy it is to try to avoid, with simplistic techniques and in an arbitrary and subjective way, the complex nature of the history, and Scripture as a historical document of this history. According to him, exemplary preaching (that always has some or other analogy as basis) is mostly a homiletical shortcut past the historicity of the biblical text, with a resulting hermeneutical short circuit.

As a rule, simplistic equalizations (“Today it is just like that ...”) must make the red lights flash. Is the message of the biblical text – theologically spoken – not indeed contrary to our (sinful) reality? In preaching, must we not indeed hold the text up and ask: Where are there *no* contact points? How does the text *not* apply to us? If we simply agree with the text, and the text just concurs with us, it is dangerous! In fact, we then do not get a grip on the text or on God, but vice versa! As noted above, the text has a recalcitrance, an uncontrollability, a potential to surprise us again and again. Therein indeed lies its promising nature.

It seems as though especially the so-called “occasional sermons”, during which certain biblical-historical occasions are commemorated, fall prey to the temptation of moralising analogues. So, for example, during a Pentecostal sermon on Acts 2:1-4, 11-18, we repeatedly hear that the “promise” of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit “tonight, also still is true”, but in such a way that the uniqueness and salvific-historical unrepeatability of the Pentecostal events are lost. The promise must repeat itself in exactly the same way, and the condition upon which this precise repetition takes place, is the analogue action of the present listeners with those of the first Christians. The opening words of the service already present the structure:

Now is the time of the Pentecost. Today we celebrate the feast of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. This was the beginning of the church of the Lord Jesus and what a glorious beginning it was! If we could turn the hands of time back tonight and we all were there at the church approximately 2000 years ago, then I think we would have been very excited ... Now, the Lord is still the same and, in these days, I am certain God wants to do the same this evening.

The aim of the preacher is clear: he indeed wants to turn back the clock, wipe out the 2000 years of church history since Pentecost, and allow the time of Pentecost and that of “today,” “this evening,” “these days” to shift into the void to be precisely the same as then. The first Pentecost becomes the model for the church of all times, its unrepeatable character (*ephapax*, once and for all) precisely reconstructed in the present time, so that, in a certain sense, it could become a timeless feast. The theological consequence of this presumed and compelling analogue is fatal, and the legalistic turn that it adopts virtually unavoidable, as appears from the closing sentence of the above quotation: “God wishes to do the same”

During Pentecost God acted, but apparently not anymore. Now, it is but a prospect (like a refrain the word *wants* or *wishes* appears 18 times throughout the sermon!). Why? What is He waiting for? The answer to this, which the preacher presumes, as already seen in 3.7.2, is classically legalistic, and here reads: To see whether the present generation of Christians can act like that first generation, whether they can make the analogue true and the times precisely the same, and allow them to overlap exactly! What previously was theologically a specific situation (God acted and the first believers reacted and became witnesses), becomes an anthropological determined situation (the present generation acts, become witnesses – and God reacts by allowing it again to be Pentecost, exactly like the first time). Therefore, it is quite consistent when, further in his sermon, the preacher reveals his hermeneutics in a (somewhat disconnected) sentence such as the following: “*So His church started. No different, but just so The Lord wants us too to change and his church must be so. Then we become his witnesses.*”

This sharply contrasts a biblical text such as Acts 1:8: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses* Take note of what happens here: the theological order (code) of the text has been precisely reversed. What, in the text, reads: God *did* and we *can/shall*, becomes God *will* and we *must*. Therefore, it is so ironic when, in the introductory paragraph, the preacher says: “...the Lord is still the same and I am certain that He wants” In the sermon, God is not really the same (what He did, changes into what He will do), and all certainty is

placed onto the loose screws of human actions. The historical indicative becomes a futuristic imperative – which is fulfilled by “us” who have the task to allow Pentecost to realise once more.

4.7.2 ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALOGUES

An especially popular way to cross the bridge between the history that the text relates to and the present, and a variant of the above, is by way of an anthropological analogue, with the typical concomitant allegorizing, atomizing, psychologizing, spiritualizing and typologizing of the biblical text (cf Greidanus 1970:85 ff). Biblical figures are presented that must be imitated (the so-called *imitatio*-philosophy), they become a law by which the spiritual quality of the listeners is tested. Needless to say, there are thousands of victims of this specific type of legalism.

For example, in this way the example of Peter is turned into a moralistic law in a sermon on Matthew 24:30. Firstly we hear: “... *the central character of the story is none other than Jesus. The secondary character is Peter.*” Then a dehistoricization of the text follows when the storm at sea is presented as “... *the waves of humanity and ... the billows of the chaos of everyday life.*” The psychologizing of the text accompanies this when we hear: “*I think that this is because Peter speaks so silently yet so magnificently into our hearts and into our lives.*”

This again leads to the unavoidable moralizing: “*What Jesus has started in a person’s life, He has the power to continue. If we only keep our eyes on Him ... but also that we persist in steadily looking at Jesus, continuously, every moment of every living day of our lives, that we never take our eyes off Jesus*” In this, Peter is the (negative!) role-model for us – he did not look at Jesus enough. We must trump him. We must not fail, but must always be strong. Eventually, Peter is placed so at the centre of attention, that it is no wonder the preacher contradicts himself: “*As I said earlier on, the two central characters within this story are the characters firstly of Jesus and secondly of Peter.*” The one central character now indeed has become two! The sermon ends with a subtle reversal of the biblical text: now it no longer is Jesus that puts his hand out to grab Peter, but “*let this be a turning point in your life where you stretch out your hand in prayer And Jesus Himself will touch you again with His love*”

The woman who suffered from bleeding also followed the same moralistic path (Mk 5:25-34). Her special faith, her “spark of hope” becomes the mirror in which we must measure the quality of our faith. Her “problem ... her faith ... her fear” serve as an existential analogue to allow the listeners with their weak faith to come up to standard: “*You must believe just like this woman This morning you must seek more. You must not only seek*

Jesus for temporary salvation, but you must seek Him as an eternal treasure in your life.” Time and again we hear: “And so ... you must”

4.7.3 CHARACTERISTIC RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES

The bridge between the message of the biblical text and the reaction that the preacher expects from his listeners is often crossed with the assistance of characteristic rhetorical techniques. Techniques that, as such, certainly are not wrong, but in the legalistic framework within which they function, they fulfil a homiletical degrading function. These are mostly also techniques that cannot be inferred from the structure of the biblical text (on which the preacher should have worked harder). Possibly, this is an expression of the preacher’s (unconscious) feeling that his/her homiletical method did not do justice to the performative character of the biblical text, and now, in some or other way, had to be “supplemented” or “strengthened.”

4.7.3.1 *Rhetorical questions*

Firstly, there is the use of rhetorical questions. The preacher has a vision of what God did in biblical times, and wants his or her listeners to act or be like the people with whom God dealt. Instead of expressing God’s actions (anew), he/she moves over to what people now should do, pointing out their shortcomings with the aid of inquisitorial questions, with the supposition that they now can and should supply the answers to these questions. Questions of this nature are usually stacked in the closing paragraphs of sermons, as a type of *checklist for self-examination*. The frequent use of this rhetorical technique is such, that it appears as though preachers almost suffer from a type of anxiety not to allow their listeners to go home empty-handed, to give them something concrete to take with them on their way through life – as though the Gospel is not enough! As though the Word cannot be trusted!

A single, especially exhausting example from a sermon on Psalm 98:

And therefore then once again, this penetrating most profound question this morning: Do you experience this salvation? Have you already met Jesus Christ? Have you already seen the God of Psalm 98, the King of Psalm 98, have you already noticed Him in a joyful song? Are you part of his coming glory? Are you part of Jesus Christ’s second coming when he appears upon the clouds? ... And this brings me once more to the core question: If Jesus should appear on the clouds today, if Jesus should appear for you today on the clouds, are you prepared to receive him? Live that song that can only be

found in Jesus Christ and that can take hold of your whole life, does it live in your hearts? Are you prepared? Are you ready to meet the Bridegroom? Are you ready to take your place at the wedding feast? Do you sing a song, the song of the King, the song of the great King, who also took you out and saved you from sin and death?

Added to all these questions, another question is added for the listeners, one that they themselves must answer: What must I do to be able to answer positively to all these questions? This sends the congregation grimly out of the church door, either determined to put a correct tick to each question; or discouraged in the knowledge that the fodder was hung too high for them; or dull because they have heard such appeals so many times, but had no success in fulfilling them. Eventually, they allow the words to flow over them like a meaningless ritual, with the scant consolation of their one achievement – they were in church! Considering the type of sermons that they are exposed to there, indeed an achievement! Thus, with all the questions, people become immune to the Gospel

The good news of the Gospel does not ask, it gives; it asks only to the measure in which it gives.

4.7.3.2 Rhetoric of the superlative

A second methodology that is applied fairly commonly is to inspire the listeners in an analogy to deal with biblical information, i.e. the rhetoric of superlatives. The appeal must be emphasized, inspiring the congregation by means of a plethora of adjectives and adverbs.

From an absolute flood of examples, I shall single out one. In a sermon on John 14:25-31, the preacher says: *“When the disciples had been Spirit-filled, they knew the truth But how do we know that there is a God? And how will that happen? If we are truly followers, truly disciples of Jesus, He has promised that the Spirit, the Helper, will come and reveal the truth about God.”*

A homiletical change of gears takes place between *when* (an indication of time of the Spirit’s indicative work) and *If* (that introduces a conditional construct in which the congregation has become the acting agent). This change of gears is – typically – greased with the emphasised *truly*.

I repeat: Who qualifies? When am I truly a disciple of Jesus?

4.7.3.3 Change of tense

A general tendency, basic to the majority of analyses made thus far, but which must be stated explicitly here, is the typical legalistic rhetorical

technique of changing the tense of the text. What God did, God will do; what God does, becomes what people (now) should do (cf again 3.7.2).

One confirming example: after a detailed and emotional description of the lepers' condition at the time of Jesus – with reference to Luke 5:12-16 – the preacher focuses on Jesus' declaration in verse 13: "*I am willing ... Be clean!*" He translates this declaration as follows: "*Brothers and sisters and young people, Jesus wants to cleanse us from all our sins, He wants to make us clean.*" At first glance, this looks like a repetition of Jesus' "willing" in the biblical text. Then, however, this follows: "*Won't you follow the example of this man of the grave (the leper) this morning? Won't you also come to Him if He wants to tell you this morning: 'I am willing. Be clean'? Yes, come with your sin, come in your struggle, come in your weakness, but come to Jesus. That is the main issue, because as this man was cleansed, so you can also make peace with God this morning.*"

The indicative movement of the text, the seamless link between "willing" and "Be" is taken apart, and an alien component forced in: the pious movement of humans to Jesus. Jesus' "willing," that He executes, becomes a future possibility – that He can execute only should the listener act as desired. The wedge that is driven between Jesus' act of willing and his possible will, is spelled out in the sermon as a three-point plan for salvation, borne by the rhetoric of superlatives: first there must be *absolute* trust, *total* humility and *profound* worshipping before Jesus can again act as in the case of the leper of the Bible. In the case of the listeners, Jesus does not *save* (purely and simply), He *reacts*.

4.7.4 WHEN THE (MULTIDIMENSIONAL) TEXT IS MUZZLED ...

From all the above analyses, one of the basic rules of preaching appears to be: to constantly guard against limiting the promising nature of Scripture. But, what exactly is meant by this "promising nature" of the biblical text? Does it mean that a close adherence to a *grammatical identity* between the biblical text and the sermon's text must be found? This certainly must be an option, but not the only one. To remain true to the promising character of the biblical text means, seen more comprehensively, that one should seek a *dynamic equivalent* between text structure (or preferably: text culture, i.e. the dynamic movement of the text – that which the text desires; cf 4.6.4) and the sermon's structure. This dynamic equivalent includes more than merely determining a timeless theology that could exist also apart from the specific structure of a particular biblical text. It aims at more than, for example, the explanation of a rigid "promise-fulfilment" scheme. The specific lines and contours of the original preaching event, as expressed in the biblical text, should rather be expressed. The particular impact and

objective of each biblical text, and its specific proclamation structure (whether in the form of an elenctic law, an indicative exoneration or a parnetic commandment) offers the space within which the promise of God's actions can be traced, in order to arrive at a relevant proclamation structure for the sermon (cf Müller 1973:128). To justify the promising character of the biblical text demands more than determining *what* was said in it, also more than an imitation of *how* it was said, but penetrates through to the question *why*; in fact, it is stated thus in the biblical text. Legalism's text-negating not only affects the content of what God said, or disregards the way in which He said it, but also what God meant by it. In fact, legalism is a denial of God's intent with people, a declaration that they do not require or need it. It silences God's promising speech, makes its many forms mute. Legalism – i.e. one element of it – is the result of the elimination of Scripture, but simultaneously a process that actively causes this elimination that, inter alia, leads to the biblical text with its multicoloured and promising forms of speech becoming mute, being muzzled. This can, for example, happen in the following ways:

4.7.4.1 *The legalistic falsifying of the Gospel's indicative*

This form of legalism is often the most difficult to unmask. Such sermons sound evangelical, especially when they are also accompanied by a flood of Christological formulae. However, the question is whether the mere quotation of such formulae is necessarily concomitant with the development of their evangelical quality (cf 3.7). Often, legalism is indeed concealed in a series of Reformatory *solas*, or disguised in a cloak of Christological correctness. However, all this forms but an introduction to the actual word, viz. the proclamation of moralizing appeals.

An interesting example of this is a sermon on Acts 10, with the theme: "Divine appointment." The preacher begins by relating his own encounter with Jesus: "*I had a divine appointment with the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Then, while looking at the listeners: "*God wants a divine appointment with you*" Who makes this appointment? Who keeps it? It seems that the preacher wishes to solve this question Christologically – evangelically – when he starts to talk fairly extensively about Christ as the "anointed One," "compassionate One," "suffering One," "the risen One," "ordained and exalted One" and "the Saviour for all mankind" – all predicates found in Acts 10. These titles, which truly express Jesus' salvific work, all lose their power when the sermon continues to describe the possibility that Jesus will act – should the listeners agree thereto. The "divine appointment" is taken from the powerful field of God's merciful work and made dependent on people's advisory plans. We hear:

In the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ He wants to bless you this morning He wants to heal you this morning He wants to bless us, He wants to heal us, He wants to deliver us. He is able this morning to touch us. He is able this morning to love us Allow Him to love you. Allow Him to free you. Allow Him to heal you. Allow Him to encourage you. Allow Him to deliver you.

Apparently, Christ is very willing and extremely able to do so, but does not keep the “divine appointment.” He must wait until the listeners keep the appointment, before He can do something. The “divine appointment,” after all, was not so “divine”

4.7.4.2 The legalistic falsifying of the imperative of the Gospel

This probably takes place most easily. Texts that command are more easily misunderstood than texts with an indicative structure, are more easily seen and preached as naked commands and demands that God addresses to people. Therefore, especially here, it is important to keep an eye on the evangelical framework within which it stands. A biblical commandment is never merely a naked command, but rather a powerful undertaking, a promising invitation to live your faith every day from the reality of salvation. What was previously said about rhetorical questions (4.7.3.1) can be confirmed here in another way: God commands to the measure in which He gives; He also gives in the measure to which He commands. The commandment is indeed at home in the Gospel’s house.

This does not apply to the following sermon that, inter alia, provides an exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 5:18. As so often is the case, the sermon begins with sentences that already contain and prepare the legalistic closing of the sermon.

After this evening’s service, Pentecost 1995 will be something of the past. The Pentecost is celebrated every year, not because it is a law why we must celebrate Pentecost [sic] And actually we should not celebrate Pentecost for one week in the year; we should celebrate Pentecost for 52 weeks in a year. This is the criterion that God wants us to apply to our lives. Pentecost is not meant for one day or one week, but it must continuously be there.

Ironically, the preacher first declares that Pentecost is not meant as a law (perhaps an unconscious feeling that his hermeneutics indeed have tempted him to this?), but then the typical flood of legalistic speech follows: should ... criterion ... must, and naturally that God wants it so. When he says: “it must continuously be there,” he does not say who must continu-

ously let it be there. The sentence remains without an acting subject. On whom does the salvific fact of Pentecost depend? God? Man? That the latter actually is implied, in a legalistic way, becomes clear from the exegesis of 1 Thessalonians 5:18:

This evening you say to me: What is my position if I'm not filled with the Holy Spirit? I want to say to you that you live in atrocious sin. You say: "How do I manage it?" I get it right because the Word of God says to us – 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – "Be filled with the Holy Spirit" – the Lord expects that you must be filled with the Holy Spirit This evening I ask you: Are you and I prepared for the Gospel? I ask you this evening. If you are not a child of God, then I also ask you this question: Are you prepared to bring the Gospel?"

Should one understand 1 Thessalonians 5:18 as a naked command, then you probably could say that God expects you to be filled with the Holy Spirit. But, is this the Gospel? The listener is pressurized on all sides with demands: Pentecost "must continuously be there," and God also "expects" it. Is the text indeed a command to be obeyed, or a promise to receive? Is *be filled* not a passive verb ("let God fill you") that can only be understood theologically within the framework of God's active work by his Spirit? God expects nothing of us. If that were the case, then the Gospel would not be necessary, or, at most, be a means to help us to realise our own potential.

4.7.5 ANOTHER WAY?

I return to my statement that legalism in preaching often arises from the "problem" that is posed by the nature of Scripture, namely that it is a historical book that makes theological declarations. This results in a bridge being built between what God did in the past and what He does now, in ways that mostly have a legalistic effect on the listener. Now, the question is: In what way must this then happen? Is there a way (or ways) that so honours the unique nature of Scripture that the listener of the sermon hears its evangelical meaning? This is a complex question, a wrestling that all preachers experience.

To add to what was already said in 4.6.4, I point out the following basic perspectives that, in my opinion, are of decisive importance – especially in the light of the phenomenon of legalism in preaching. Josuttis (1966:27) already pointed out that there is only one responsible way in which the hermeneutical transition can be brought about, and that is with the aid of doctrine, specifically theodicy as the most profound nerve of theology. Any other methodology (anthropological, rhetorical, etc.) contains the seed of

legalism. However, by “theodicy” is not meant a timeless set of dogmatic truths, but rather, an event of God that holds the promise of *God’s presence* (cf again chapter 3). As previously stated, preaching is about the specific action of God as revealed in the original proclaiming structure of the biblical text. However, the dynamic equivalent between the structures of the text and the sermon do not imply a mere recitation of what God did in the past, but includes the risk, in the light of the biblical text, to declare God’s actions anew in the present, or rather, to declare the new actions of the same God in the present. Only in this way does the original proclaiming structure become an actual proclaiming structure in which God’s great deeds are announced to contemporary humans. The promising nature of the biblical text indeed includes this, indeed invites one to discover it. To preach exegetically correct is important, but is not the final objective of preaching. In fact, here “correct” can sometimes be wrong. The wonder of preaching is that it works with texts through which the living Person of God approaches us, texts with a theological nature in the sense that they, primarily, tell and retell the stories of the acting God (Niebuhr 1941:32-66,101-113). However, strictly speaking and as said before, we do not proclaim texts as an objective, but the living Person of God. The text is, at most, the glasses through which we attain a new vision of this God and reality. People need not make the text true in a (legalistic) way; God makes it true. People need not become or be according to all kinds of moralistic methods like figures in biblical texts, nor do they need to reproduce the historical situation of the text in order to experience its actuality. *God Himself bridges the distance between the text and ourselves*. This is the Alpha and the Omega of preaching, which does not exclude human actions or reactions, but indeed includes them (theologically). Therefore, primarily, preaching is joy, a joy that is related to the discovery of the promise of the text. This leads to a new vision of God in the present, a new dream that can be dreamt of Him in the present reality, a dream in which the congregation together with the living God can read the reality anew, can understand and transform it anew. The objective of preaching is not to give people an arsenal of recipes according to which they must change reality; rather to open their eyes so that they can distinguish the reality of God’s work in the world, and invite them to participate therein. The venture and the wonder of preaching lies in the promise of the biblical text being so revealed that the congregation discovers God in his acting presence in their specific context, and shares in the joy thereof.

In his gripping *Predigtlehre*, Rudolf Bohren (1974:17 ff) indeed makes joy one of the cornerstones of his homiletics. He moves away from the traditional “exegesis–application” (*explicatio–applicatio*) scheme that could easily lead to a false objectivity and a false subjectivity, in which the biblical text

functions as a closed system, a collection of historical examples of existence possibilities on the one hand and, on the other, the congregation as a collection of people with the potential to measure themselves against these possibilities and to conform thereto. However, Bohren (1974:142 ff) speaks of the Word's various tense-forms, not referring merely to the grammatical tense-forms of Scripture, but rather the various ways in which the *óne* God expresses Himself at various times and thus reveals Himself as the acting God. The link between past, present and future lies in the Name of God, which, however, is not meant as a cliché, but as the most basic hermeneutical principle for all preaching, yes, for theology in general. If one merely works with the biblical text as an instrument for *explicatio* and *applicatio* then one indeed misses both the text and the congregation, because only the hermeneutical-responsible proclamation of the Name of God does justice to the Gospel, i.e. the promise of the text is revealed to the congregation for whom it was meant.

In the following chapter we note the meaning especially of the *congregation* as the third crucial element in the process of preparing sermons.

Sermon example 2

TAKE, READ! (Isaiah 55:1, 6-13)

... so is my word that goes out from my mouth ... (Isa 55:11)

In his book, *Confessiones*, the great church father, Augustine, tells of the day of his conversion – the result of the powerful work of God’s Word. He was an extremely talented man, but until that stage had led a quite reckless life as a student of philosophy in Rome, despite his experience of a gnawing restlessness deep within him. On the one hand, he did want to be converted, but on the other he did not. He even prayed quasi-piously that the Lord should transform him, but – he usually added – please not immediately! This tension in his life increased. One day it drove him out of the house; he had to go for a walk in his garden to contemplate his life. What happened to him he describes as follows:

“I threw myself down under a figtree and allowed my tears to flow freely. Miserably I called above: How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why does an end to my impurity not come in this hour?”

“I was busy saying these things and wept in brokenness of heart when, suddenly, I heard the voice of a boy or a girl – I don’t know which – that came from a neighbouring house, singing and repeating several times: Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege! (Take, read! Take read!)”

“I immediately stopped crying and wondered whether it could be possible that children would use such words in any kind of game, because I could not remember hearing something similar ever before. I arose, because I could think of nothing else but that this was a divine commandment to me to open the Bible and read the first pericope before my eyes.

“I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius had sat, because this is where I left the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the pericope which I first saw – Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Rom 13:14).

“I didn’t want to read any further, neither was this necessary, as, immediately at the close of the sentence, something like the light of complete certainty shone into my heart, and all the darkness of doubt disappeared.”

During those moments, the Word moved Augustine as never before and

transformed his life radically. It was as though the Lord stood before him and spoke directly to him through this biblical text, as though the yellow pages of a piece of biblical parchment had become a gateway through which the Lord of heaven and earth Himself came walking towards him

Perhaps we have not yet had such a dramatic experience with the Bible. Yet, it does sometimes happen that we read and read the Word, and we feel as though nothing in it is meant for us. That it apparently does nothing to you, does not make you warm or cold. Until something in the Bible one day grips you as never before – a word, a phrase, a truth, as it were, jumps from the Bible and you just know: now the Lord of heaven and earth Himself is speaking to me.

Isaiah 55 must have been such a word for Israel. They found themselves in exile – certainly the worst that could have happened to an Israelite. Taken from their land, possessions, temple and evidently also their God. Yes, the word of the Lord evidently remained behind in Jerusalem. His promises apparently were not fulfilled. Here, in Babylon, the Lord evidently was not to be found and his Word had become mute. Some became discouraged, and even turned their back on the Lord, started to forget Jerusalem and, in general, became citizens of Babylon. Briefly, Israel found themselves in a desert experience like the deer in Psalm 42 that pants for a drop of water, but apparently this was nowhere to be found.

Perhaps you know this feeling

On behalf of such people, people that despair of the power of God's Word, Isaiah 55, amongst others, is in the Bible. Already in the first verse this chapter immediately draws open the sluices for those who thirst – it is like a fountain that springs up for desert-travellers, when the Lord Himself says:

*Come, all you who are thirsty,
Come to the waters;
And you who have no money,
Come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
Without money and without cost (1).*

So wide is this invitation that some orthodox people in Israel began to grumble. What? Can *all people* then just come? Even the unfaithful and deserters? Also those who turned their backs on the Lord in Babylon? Is grace not meant for the faithful and the devoted? No, it is meant for *all*. Yes, all.

The response that the Lord gives to these grumbles, is certainly not only one of the best known declarations in the Bible, but is also one for the strangest, but most wonderful words:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
As the heavens are higher than the earth.
So are my ways higher than your ways
And my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 8,9).*

From our human perspective, this not only says that the Lord sometimes acts strangely, but especially that his mercy, his preparedness to forgive repeatedly surpasses by far our narrow-mindedness, our bigoted Pharisaic disposition. Yes, *the Lord always again forgives* (7). The offer of his grace is wide and great. Herein lies our consolation: the word of the Lord that comes to us is a word of grace *par excellence*, an exoneration, forgiveness. It says: *Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near* (cf v.6), also in Babylon, also in the desert, and also when down in the dumps.

But this consolation goes even further. God's word of grace is not merely a far-off, *theoretical* word about forgiveness and salvation, not a word that, after being spoken, hesitates uncertainly around in the air, but a *powerful, working word*. Because,

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return to it without watering the earth
And making it bud and flourish,
So that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
So is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
But will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (10,11).*

Oh, we might sometimes think that God's word is mute, that it does not work. We may reckon that God has given up on us. The period in which the Word sinks away in the ground like rainwater and snow may sometimes feel long, may indeed result in our desert-experience. Now, the working of the Word may still be concealed for us – but it works! Its blessings fall like rain on us, soak us, although we are often unaware of it! Yes, even if we rebel against it – the Word does not return empty to its Sender!

But ... can a person rebel against the Word? Yes, how tragic this may be, the impossible can apparently become possible: you can try to hide in your little shelter against the rain of the Word; you can try to open your little umbrella against the drops of grace instead of standing in the rain to be washed clean! So that snow falls on you to wash you whiter than snow! So that you drink the water of the bubbling fountain! So that you ask the will of the Lord while He is still to be found, call Him while He is still near!

(6.) Yes, it may still feel as though the Word has drained off into the ground, as though it is powerless, but it certainly will bear fruit, will liberate us from our exile. Eventually, the Word's life-giving water will penetrate so deeply into our desert-experience, that it will bear the fruit of an exodus, and transform our lives into a beautiful garden.

Historically speaking, this was so for Israel upon their return to Jerusalem, and so it will be for us when God's irresistible Word finally leads us from the exile of this dispensation and we, together with the entire creation, will be saved from "*the bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*" (Rom 8:21). Yes, so great will this exodus be that even the creation must praise it, also "*the mountains and hills will burst into song before you and all the trees in the field will clap their hands*" (Isa 55:12). The Word creates a new heaven and earth, where, "*instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow*" (thorn bush and briers = images of the Fall; pine tree and myrtle = images of Eden). "*This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign which will not be destroyed*" (13).

Should we not know this even better than the prophet Isaiah? After all, God's working Word of grace, his well-planned Word of forgiveness, became human and came to live among us (Jh 1:14). *This Word did, par excellence, everything that God had sent Him to do, and did not return to the Father with empty hands.* Oh, it might appear as though even He does not have much influence in the world, and just drains away into the soil. In fact, like a grain of wheat He fell to the ground and died, so that He could reap a great harvest (Jh 12:24). The Word, the incarnate Word, breaks through to above the ground, breaks through the walls of the grave and who can stop Him?

We live in a special time, now at the beginning of a new millennium. Also – especially! – now God is near, also now his will is to be determined. Also now it is the right time, also now it is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2). We do have the Book of all books that tells us this on every page, from beginning to end. Oh, the Word must not fall on us like raindrops without our feeling or hearing it. It must not soak us without our bearing any fruit! May we rather deal with the Bible as Christoph Blumhardt writes:

"Often, when one reads a biblical word, it is like a word that definitely has not been written by humans, like a word that separates itself from all human understanding, and it is enclosed in a cloud of godly power, of godly action. Then it enters our hearts, and we cannot understand that something like this could be possible. We could not understand it at all, nor believed that it by any means would be worthwhile to still read the Word, because we know it so well, already from our school days. And suddenly such a word

comes to us, like a stronger, mightier angel, who stirs our hearts with a holy hand, and our body and soul are opened, and we breathe something of a heavenly Word, of the Word that does wonders, wonders to our heart, wonders in our emotions, in our thoughts, wonders in all that we are.”

Can one say more?

Take, read! Take, read!

The living voice of the gospel: When the congregation speaks



It is of crucial importance for preaching that we have a *healthy theological vision* of the congregation. In this chapter we note:

- The constituting role of the congregation in the process of preparing a sermon
- The influence of, and reaction to, the context within which the congregation finds itself, and
- Examples of sermons that have a failed (moralistic) vision of the congregation.



5.1 Introduction: Concurrence with the congregation

"The Word of God can never be separated from God's people." By means of this acute formulation Luther asks our renewed attention for a principle relationship that is also of decisive importance for homiletics (cf Meuser 1983:112). This emphasizes the fact that preaching the Word of God is about his people, about the congregation who are gathered to hear the Word. Luther's comment even implies that the congregational *reality* essentially influences the way in which the Word of God comes to the congregation. Tom Long (1989:45) effectively describes this (homiletical) relationship, this interaction between text and congregation:

We go to scripture, then, not to glean a set of facts about God or the faith that can be announced whenever and wherever, but to encounter a Presence, to hear God's voice speaking to us ever anew, calling us in the midst of the situations in which we find ourselves to be God's faithful people. The picture of the preacher sitting alone in the study, working with a biblical text in preparation for the sermon, is misleading. It is not the preacher who goes to the scripture; it is the church that goes to the scripture by means of the preacher. The preacher is a member of the community, set apart by them and sent to the scripture to search, to study, and to listen obediently on their behalf. So the preacher goes to the scripture, but not alone The preacher explores the scripture, faithfully expecting to discover the truth of God's claim there and always willing to be surprised by it. Those who have sent the preacher have questions and concerns, and sometimes the text will speak directly to those questions. The text may, however, call those questions into question.

The text thus does not belong to the preacher. Just as an arch-individualist, who cannot spell "we," has no right to stand on the pulpit. The biblical text belongs to the congregation and must, as it were, be passed on from member to member to be inspected and heard from all angles, until all agree by saying: "We have heard God's voice." To preach is not to be a theological dictator, or a winged orator, or a holy ascetic who wants to live outside or above the congregation; it is rather finding concurrence with the congregation around a biblical text. Because: *"The Word of God can never be separated from the people of God."*

5.2 The congregation: Bearer and defender of the truth

The secret of preaching is about the voices of the present God and that of the biblical text. However, it does not stop there. Preachers' spirituality is evident not only through their relationship with God or from dealing with the biblical text, but also from their relationship with the congregation, from the way in which the preachers listen to the congregational voice. Therefore, the classical comparison must be added here: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi, lex convivendi, lex praedicandi* (as you pray, so you confess, so you live, so you live together, so you preach). This chapter deals with this *convivendi*, in this case the living-together-with and listening to the congregation and the implication thereof for preaching.

The congregation's voice must definitely be heard in the process of preparing a sermon. After all, preaching is directed at the congregation, but it also, *inter alia*, originates from the congregation. In a sense, the preaching is the congregation's "property," the preacher not being the private owner (Bluck 1989:33). If you wish to read biblical texts merely as an individual, then you run the risk of being one-eyed. Reading by only one person cannot do justice to the text as it is simply too profound, too rich, too multidimensional. There is more than one truth, more than one face of God in each text, too much for one eye to see. Therefore, the preacher needs the congregation's many eyes, his/her privileges as exegesist and proclaimer must be expanded to include the congregation.

But, does the emphasis on the multiplicity of truths and insights not lead to relativism? If there are so many truths, does this not mean that there is not only one truth? No, not necessarily. Each text, with its many colours, must be read against the fundamental text of Scripture and find its coherence in this fundamental text. Naturally, the question is: Who determines what the fundamental text is?

At a first level, we should say: not only individual exegesists, such as ministers and theologians. The Bible is the Book of the church, in the widest sense of the word. Here the *hermeneutics of ecumenicity* has its function: my perception of the fundamental text, and every other text, I must always read together with, and through, the pain of others, always keeping in mind the two basic rules: firstly, that my perspective may not harm others, and secondly, that I myself must be open to listening to the perspective of others, and must be willing to change. In this sense, the reading of a biblical text and, in fact, the whole process of preparing a sermon, cannot be regarded as the minister's exclusive individual action or theological private property.

An ecumenical hermeneutics also functions not only in width, but also in depth: it considers the working of the specific text in the history of the

church, it listens to the echoes of this text's working history in the writings and witnesses of the church fathers and mothers. An ecumenical hermeneutics can never be father- and motherless and, therefore, neither can it bear orphaned sermons. It stands in a rich tradition that protects us from theological arrogance and constantly reminds us of the consolation and encouragement of the great multitude of faith witnesses who surround us (cf Heb 12:1). If you wish to practise ecumenical hermeneutics, be humble. Apparently, shortly before his death, Luther wrote on a slip of paper: *Nobody can understand Scripture if you have not ruled the church together with the apostles and prophets for a hundred years*

The congregation is the bearer and protector of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). Thus, the minister's "amen" is not the end but, in a certain sense, the beginning of the sermon, as the congregation will have to say their "amen" thereto, must exercise their right and power as recipients of the Word (cf also 5.3.2).

The preaching, indeed, does not begin and end with the preaching moment; the congregation *precedes and follows it up* with an Amen! But, this amen is not the end of the sermon, rather a new beginning – so that the congregation themselves now become preachers in a world waiting to hear the Gospel. Therefore, the process of preparing a sermon must, from beginning to end, from the preparation to the presentation, to the after-effects of the sermon, be co-determined principally by the congregation. Preachers must see and implement the congregation's spiritual wealth, their homiletical potential. In fact, preachers find not only some of the best commentaries on preaching on their bookshelves, but also in the marrow and blood, in the tissue, yes in the context of the congregation that lives around their preaching.

This demands that preachers view their congregations with new eyes, that they use a *theological key* if they wish to unlock the congregational secrets. That they *theologically judge* those who attend the worship service, i.e. people whom God has been working on for long, people for whom Christ died and was resurrected, people for whom God's grace therefore is enough. That they regard those who sit in the church pews as gifts of God, rather as religious clients whose interests must be dealt with as well as possible. But, what does all this mean for the process of sermon-making? Karl Barth's comments (1964:96-97) to this effect speak of wisdom. He groups them into five philosophical passages – an abbreviated version follows:

- The preacher must love his/her congregation, and be one with them. The basic attitude must be: this is my people and I want to share with them what God has given me. No matter how eloquent you may be, even if you are more articulate than angels, but without love, you are nothing

- Because the preacher loves the congregation, he/she must live the life of the congregation, at their level. The preacher need not necessarily be the cleverest among them, or the town's fortune-teller who reveals people's thoughts, but the question that expresses their most profound thoughts must always be the concern of the preacher's heart.
- Preaching is not merely a clearer and more adequate explanation of the meaning of life, amidst other explanations – although this is not unimportant – but rather it places the meaning of life within the light of God's revelation.
- To preach is to be tactful! It is to know what and when to say to whom. When, in fact, biblical and prophetic criticism is necessary, this may only be given in a humble and reverent spirit – there is no need to make an idol of the truth.
- To preach is to be aware of the moment, of the hour of both the preacher and congregation. It is to ask: What does the contemporary situation demand of the preacher and the congregation? After all, both the preacher and the congregation share the same historical experience; therefore, the preacher's words must be relevant to the listeners' immediate interests. By understanding this, preachers will be able to avoid a continuous discourse on themes that have lost their relevance a long time ago.

This underlines the fact that preachers must be with their congregations, not on another (theological, sociological, cosmological) planet. Preachers will probably need to adapt their programmes of preparing sermons, as well as attend to the creation of opportunities and structures within which to do justice to the congregation's contributions. For this, preachers must more often look into the congregation's eyes and hear their voices, so that their preaching stools begin to resemble roundtables (the title of McClure's book: *The roundtable pulpit*, 1995; cf also 5.4.2).

Preachers may experience such a paradigm shift as a threat. In fact, preachers often discourage any disruption of their system, because they know inherently that their system is at fault. However, to be taken out of your safe haven like this, could indeed be enriching. Rudolf Bohren (1971: 521-522, translated) quotes the preacher, Franz Jantsch, in this respect:

A woman once interrupted my sermon on marital love and called out: "Reverend, I can't take this. I protest." I continued by asking a wise man from the congregation to respond. Then others also took part in the discussion, and standpoints were clarified. I was not annoyed with the woman, on the contrary. She apologized because her temperament had got the upper hand, but this incident made a great impression on the congregation.

It certainly is not advisable that every sermon be interrupted in this way, but this woman's interjection is a concentrated example of what a congregational discussion could be. After all, the Spirit was not given only to the preacher, but also to the congregation. The preacher's charisma is good, but the sum total of gifts that the Spirit gives to the congregation, is better.

We cannot lose sight of this: preaching is truly a congregational, and thus contextual issue. Therefore, we shall repeatedly have to learn to facilitate the congregational input and feedback regarding preaching, not only because it is theologically important, but also, communication-scientifically, essential. This appears to be an important field for further examination. After all

5.3 Two pairs of eyes see better than one ...

We have already visited the art gallery several times (23, 64, 73, 75, 85). Now, let's pop in to the art class! The students' assignment is: paint your own interpretation of – *Life as being en route to ...* Begin! You have exactly three hours



The wonder of art is this: Each of the interpretations will be unique – each with its own individuality, personal preferences for colour and brush technique, and the unique view of that which all see. Which of these interpretations would be “right”? Well, perhaps some (according to our view!) might be “more beautiful” or “more artistic” than others, but each of those interpretations has its own right and each one is “right”! If you wanted to see the total image of the class's insights, you would have to put all the paintings beside each other and, in a sense, see them simultaneously. One

theme, so many perceptions! Two – or more – pairs of eyes see better than one!

In a congregation, there are people with different views of God, which they built up over the years, inter alia by reading the Bible and hearing sermons about the Bible. These congregational perceptions are a reality which we, in preaching, cannot or may not disregard. On the contrary, to us, as preachers, it offers a wealth, beauty, a broader view of the one God in whom we all believe, and saves us from being single-eyed. Shared joy and amazement because of the grace of God is double joy and amazement; discoveries and views of God that you exchange and point out to others are especially those that remain with you for a long time

5.3.1 ME IN MY LITTLE CORNER ...?

It is ironic that, especially in some Reformed traditions, members and ministers have not yet learnt to rise from their painting corner and go to see others' attempts. Each sits in his/her little corner and, actually, wears blinkers against the bigger, more beautiful vision(s) of God.

Therefore, preachers, for example, need not only the insights of other theologians and preachers, but, in a particular sense, also those of the congregation. Preachers are principally dependent on other people who have also seen something of God; they simply cannot do without other witnesses of the invisible God. Preaching could definitely never be a mere individualistic practice or merely a brilliant solo flight – for this our “subject” is too large. In a land of the sighted, the one-eyed cannot be the king. “Lone rangers” do not belong on the pulpit.

Therefore, preachers must deliberately “give away” their preaching attempts to people, with the request that they assess them – not only to theologians, preachers and literary experts, but especially “ordinary” people, people who would have a mundane and practical vision of your work, and who could possibly, at least, liberate you to a certain extent from your single-eyedness. In any case, have we ever possessed something without first giving it away? Preachers should appreciate people who have a totally different perspective and whose theology differs entirely from their own. After all, the alternative to your standpoint brings you closer to the truth or, at least, helps you to contemplate (your view of) the truth.

On the one hand, thus, one must guard against a preaching concept that turns the sermon into a monologue, entirely authoritarian and devoid of any criticism. On the other hand, an underestimation of preaching must also be rejected. Congregants' interpretations and perceptions may not so determine the sermon that it no more systematically proclaims the full council of God, thus curtailing the voice of specific texts. An interaction, a

dialogue between pulpit and pew should rather develop in which the current one-person system (the minister being this person) is broken through in the preaching. This will not only do justice to the congregation, but also to the preacher's office.

There must, indeed, be serious reflection on the office of the preacher. For example, Moltmann (1975:303) makes the significant comment that even the manner in which the preacher mounts the pulpit, reveals something of the concept of the office and preaching that functions consciously or unconsciously in that congregation or church. Whether the preacher approaches the pulpit in a dignified procession, or even merely from outside the gathering of believers (through the vestry door!), is symbolic of a certain interpretation of the ministry. A preacher who comes from outside and from above, is thus authoritarian and dogmatically untouchable. But if the preacher arises from the congregation to take his/her place before them, he/she is one of, and one with them, and the preacher's words are a testimony that arises from the congregation's particular situation and crises, it is a word with which they can identify, thus also may question.

5.3.2 ... AND YOU IN YOURS?

Besides the preacher's office, there must also be serious reflection on the congregational role in the process of preparing the sermon.

It is clear that for this another tradition, another culture must be created in the church: something that implies a whole series of changes and a pastoral process, because members have grown up with the current tradition in the church, a tradition in which they, to a large extent, were accustomed to silence in the pews. After all, in church one hears ... and remains silent. You do not willy-nilly show the colours of your faith, do not willy-nilly remove the cloth over your painting of God for others

Partly, this is the minister's fault: only he/she speaks, and criticism is sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, discouraged. The point of departure is: only the minister has seen the Unseen One and heard his voice; only the minister may articulate this. Apparently, a silent congregation is much more acceptable than one who actively agrees – or disagrees! – with the preaching. However, in the process, the congregation becomes uncommunicative, and the minister becomes lonely, with the great responsibility of reflecting alone the fullness of God on his/her canvas.

Naturally, a considerable number of members are not reticent in saying when a sermon, in their opinion, was “good” or “beautiful.” (In some cases, members will say that a sermon was “bad” – but definitely not to the minister!). However, when these members are asked to explain why the sermon was good or beautiful, they can mostly respond only in general

terms or clichés. In this sense, they are never equipped for their service and for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:12). They often disguise this incapacity with expressions such as: “It was the Word that spoke,” or “It was the work of the Holy Spirit,” which naturally could be true, but sometimes also a mere avoiding manoeuvre to conceal a lack of a more profound insight in the preaching.

Naturally, the advent of the television and internet era further affected this incapacity of members: Accepting all that is positive about television and internet, preaching however became part of members’ “entertainment” (cf 1.3.1). A “good” sermon thus is one with entertainment value (the preacher must be a kind of “entertainer”). Ultimately, this is a symptom of members’ passive free-time entertainment, of their consumer mentality. They want stimulation, but do not wish to be involved. This, again, is a result of the social tendency of our time: the (post)modern person’s uninvolvedness and so-called privacy.

But, the Word of God cannot, may not merely be heard and disregarded. You *must* react to it, *must* respond and obey it (cf Jas 1:10-27). One recalls the discovery that Reinhold Schneider made to this effect:

One Christmas eve I opened the Holy Scripture in Potsdam – as a young lad, I had bought it as the Lutheran translation – and, after some chapters, I had to flee out to the cold, dark streets. Because it was clear to me: being subjected to this Truth turns one’s life around. This Book one cannot read ... you can only do it. This is no book. It is the Power of Life. And, it is impossible to understand but one line from it without deciding also to execute it

One cannot sit in your little corner with your little book and think that the truth will be revealed to you in this way. It must be *done*, together with others who were also stirred by the “Power of Life.” What to you was “theory,” must become practice. The Word must echo so in you that it moves your hands and feet – together with the hands and feet of the rest of the congregation.

The current circumstances of *congregational echolessness*, indeed, lead to many preachers’ frustration. This echolessness is exacerbated by the knowledge: next Sunday I will have to travel this troublesome road of sermon preparation again, again proclaim the Word, and the congregation must again “hear” the Word And?

Luther was strongly under the impression that the congregation has “the right and all power to test all church doctrines.” The congregation is more than a mere collection of individuals who must keep their “opinions” to themselves. They are not mere recipients who receive either much or little, such as, for example, spectators at a good or bad rugby match, and

furthermore do nothing, but rather are authorized judges of the proclaimed Word. It is not the sole privilege or competence of certain theological “specialists,” but of the entire congregation. Sermons – concrete sermons – are the treasure of the church, not the ministers’ private property. After all, it is the congregation who must distinguish the spirits, also those who are active on the pulpit.

Such a view of the preacher and the congregation is not exclusively dependent upon the charisma, or the lack thereof, of only the preacher. This counters the possibility that the preacher’s concealed motives and intended judgements hold sway. Within the congregation (and ecumene!) there are, indeed, enriching and controlling powers at work that can limit the tendency to individualize, at least, to a certain extent.

Enriching, in the sense that we learn to read Scripture also through the eyes of others: especially the marginalized, the despised, the forgotten, the voiceless, so as to attain a better vision on the “strange, new world” of the Bible, a world that always has a surprising effect on us and conveys unexpected news to us (cf Brown 1984:12).

Controlling because the ecumenical reading of the Bible offers the best guarantee against a sectarian reduction of it (cf Fowl & Jones 1991:29-55,119-134). Had the churches in South Africa more often wrestled together with the Bible – then how different our history would have been!

Concealed motives and prejudiced judgements are unavoidable. But these are also revealed in and through the congregation and the church’s broader community. The creative interaction with the biblical text has no better source of sustenance than the congregation and church as a full-fledged congregation (Cilliers 1992:384-385). Dingemans (1991:75, freely translated) expresses it thus:

In other words: allow the prejudice to become a judge in the “back-and-forth” of the discourse between the (collective) view of the “facts” (texts, art-works) and your own opinion. Allow your opinion to be corrected by this viewing and discussion. First allow the understanding circle to come into operation and then allow the circle for verification to clear up wrong prejudices. So you will not completely lose your subjectivity, neither reach objectivity, but one tested subjectivity or intersubjectivity is always better than one subjective opinion that holds sway as a concealed agenda in the process of understanding. Furthermore, the prejudice can be brought into the process of understanding of the text in this way, or “break open” the work of art from the concrete situation of the spectator or reader and open a new perspective on the text or work of art.

Preachers need the congregation, they cannot preach without a discourse

with the congregation being the living comment on the Word. While (theological) exegesis can take place without the congregation, this does not apply to the perception of the living God, as He, in fact, is present in a unique way in the congregation. Theological “specialists” who try to unlock timeless truths from the text by means of a number of methodological steps, will preach precisely *só*: timeless, but inopportunately. Only when the congregation’s daily world starts affecting the proclamation process, then the Word, the Gospel, can “adapt” to the time.

5.3.3 FROM EYE TO EYE ...

The preacher and the congregation will have to examine each other squarely more often. They must have a fixed appointment to meet each other “around the roundtable-pulpit” (McClure). By this, I mean a real congregational discussion, questioning and corroborating of the preaching. This has specific characteristics distinguished from other forms of discourse, for example, in the sense that it takes place in a unique way, around the Word, a specific Word that promises transformation to people. It takes place on the lap of the church, the mother of believers, in which a wealth of perceptions of God is present like nowhere else.

In such a discourse, the specific situation of a member or group of members will naturally be discussed or, at least, compile some of the questions that will be asked of the sermon. The communication-situation, the concrete context, the listeners with their horizon of perception – in short, the entire way in which the congregation has viewed the Word of God and seen the God of the Word in the past, must be very seriously addressed. After all, this influences the way in which they make their “painting” of God!

Their choice of colour and style of painting will certainly display something of, for example, factors such as the experience of preaching in that congregation, the total, accumulative effect of the preaching’s communication over weeks and months that causes them indeed to attend the worship service with a certain kind of expectation – often one-sided. The “secular” or postmodern contexts, changing social-historical circumstances, political and ideological relations that prevail within the church (Geyer 1978:478) cause them to internalize certain sermons in a very specific way, different to other congregations and other people. There is the specific church context within which the preaching takes place, for example, that of the worship service, the denomination with its traditions, the functioning of the office, etcetera. All this reflects in the painting!

But, ultimately, it must remain the biblical text and sermon that should offer solutions to specific questions, and possibly evoke other fundamental questions from the interlocutors who must distinguish between genuine

and pseudo-questions, genuine and pseudo-visions. In such a sermon discourse the possibility exists of an overlapping of the worlds of the biblical text and listener, of a clarification of speech, concepts, misunderstandings that could prevail in the various worlds, of a (continuous) comparison of what is on your canvas with that on the canvasses of others and, ultimately, with what is on the canvas of Scripture

The sermon then is the introduction to a discussion – marvelling that you wish to share with others; a perception of God that you want to point out to others. But also an opportunity to experience how others point God out to you

Such a congregational discourse is undergirded by:

- Basic educational and communication-scientific principles. According to these principles one retains approximately 10% of what you have read, 20% of what you have heard, 60% of what you have heard, seen and articulated, and 90% of what you discovered through your own research with which you were involved existentially – and especially for which you had to suffer. Such statistics counter all forms of passivity in the church (Dahm).
- Empirical investigation into the working of the sermon in the congregation. Inter alia, the findings are as follows:

The experiences during the sermon of an encounter with Christ of those who had only an individual understanding, has an effect only on a personal and, to a lesser extent, an interpersonal effect in the practice of life. The experience of an encounter with Christ of those who, in a corporative concept, articulate it and achieve greater insight, affects personal, interpersonal, labour and community levels in the practice of life ... the group helps and supports those who are involved in a corporative understanding, to make the experience longer-lasting and to apply it further in the practice of life (Pieterse 1991:32-33, translated).

5.4 Suggestions for a sermon discourse and/or biblical study

Two practical suggestions follow for stimulating the above-named “corporative understanding,” for initiating the discussion or biblical study on a sermon and the sermon’s biblical text. Precisely how this must be implemented, naturally, will differ among congregations and preachers. However, it offers a basis for the discussion and can be adapted according to circumstances.

5.4.1 The “Heidelberg-method”

QUESTIONS FOR A CONGREGATIONAL DISCOURSE

TEXT: _____ PREACHER: _____ DATE: _____

1. First impression

- What was your first, spontaneous experience of the sermon? (E.g. consolation? Guilt? Joy? Powerlessness? Hopelessness? Irritability? Boredom?)

2. God

- What did the sermon say about God? (E.g. that He is the Creator, Revealer, Judge, Condemner, Saviour, Example, Solver of life’s problems, Refuge, Father, Mother, Guardian?)

- What did you hear in the sermon about God’s Gospel (promise, good news) applicable to your current circumstances?

3. Congregation

- Positive: what image of our congregation was evident in the sermon? (E.g. have we been called by the Lord, are we saints, enlightened adults?)

- Negative: What problem or sin is presupposed or revealed in the congregation? (E.g. uncertainty, lack of prayer, apathy, disobedience...?)

4. Being called:

- To what are we, as congregation, called? (E.g. to faith, hope, love, commitment, prayer, service?)

- How can we practise this calling? (E.g. in congregational outreaches, in your work situation, marriage, relations to neighbours?)

5. Summary:

- Describe in your own words what you regard as the core of the sermon’s message.

- How will this sermon change your life?

- What, in the sermon, was not clear to you?

5.4.2 THE “ROUNDTABLE PULPIT” (McCLURE)

1. *Feedback/preliminaries* (10 minutes)
 - 1.1 How similar was last Sunday’s sermon to our previous discussion? Must we adapt our method?
 - 1.2 What feedback, of which we should take note, did you hear from the congregation?
2. *Discourse with the biblical text* (20 minutes)
 - 2.1 What questions do you have that are related to the historical context, words, or authorship of this specific text on which the sermon will be based?
(The minister will play a leading role here, but must not be stereotypical in anticipation!)
 - 2.2 Start a discussion with the author of the biblical text. What is he saying? How would you like to respond to him?
 - 2.3 If the biblical text is in the form of a story, talk to the characters, but do not identify (too quickly) with them. How do you react to their deeds and words? What would you like to say to each character?
 - 2.4 Note the type of language used in the biblical text. How does it affect and make you feel? How would you like to react to it?
3. *Discussion* (60 minutes)
 - 3.1 Determining themes. Let the group identify biblical-text themes (from daily labour, church and personal worlds) which they would like to discuss. An “open agenda” must be maintained.
 - 3.2 Interpretation. Pay attention to how the group interprets the above-named themes; what, in their opinion, is important for themselves, the church and the world?
 - 3.3 Empowerment. Allow the group to identify with the themes. Give each a reasonable opportunity to speak from their hearts. Note underlying emotions. Provide the opportunity for people to tell their own and other stories.
 - 3.4 Justification. This part may not be avoided! The demands of the Gospel, in the light of the biblical text, must be clearly understood and accepted. Ask: What difference can these matters make to ourselves, the church and the world?
 - 3.5 Practice. How do we switch all this into actions? What are our sources of help? What stumbling blocks may be presented?

5.5 Text and context

This targeting of the congregation and its own context implies, *inter alia*, that preaching attains a unique and relevant character. This, after all, is unavoidable: the congregation brings the wider context within which preaching takes place (socio-economical, political, ecological, ethical, etc.) into the process of sermon preparation. This is indispensable; contextualization is no luxury, it is part of the essence of preaching. The living Word always comes to humans *in the present*. The question is not whether a contextualization should take place, but only: How? In this, Scripture goes ahead: it is always a Word-in-context, an incarnate Word, historical and contemporary. The challenge of preaching is therefore also to examine the *context in the text*, and then to translate this in terms of the dynamic equivalent for contemporary times (cf Müller *s.a.* 134-135).

However, this contextualization of the Gospel remains one of the preacher's most difficult assignments. It demands theological maturity and sensitivity, and that the preacher allows nothing but the *Gospel* (not a weakened reduction thereof) to incarnate in the *context*, so that it truly adopts contemporary flesh and blood characteristics (for the complexity hereof, cf Webb's study, 1998). Here we must be especially wary of sermon phenomena and styles that seem to be contextual, but, indeed, reveal profoundly being embarrassed by the demand of contextuality (for examples, cf 5.9). Contemporary clichés, relevant patch-words and the haphazard introduction of "issues of the day" are not necessarily true contextualizing. All sermons need not, and cannot contextualize into all detail. What is necessary is rather that the right, more profound existential questions are raised in the process of sermon preparation and that the preacher, therefore, *truly listens to the people in their context, and listens so that the preaching can bring them to spiritual maturity and theological power of discernment, yes, to wisdom in the biblical sense of the word*. In fact, therefore preaching can never present a unique recipe, but rather contributes over a long time to the development of a disposition, an existence in wisdom before God.

Often, preachers think that they know people, that they are aware of people's circumstances. However, frequently this is not the case. Contextualizing demands time, attention and sensitivity. Not only must our road to the text be slowed down, but also our road to the heart of the congregation. No wonder that the assignment to contextualize is often rather avoided in preaching.

But, we cannot avoid the calling to contextualize the Gospel, also in preaching. We must strike people where they are, or we miss them. The question regarding the relation between text and context (or: God and

humans) accompanies preaching, and in fact, the broad spectrum of theological *loci* from the beginning. A sermon is like a string tied between the two ends of a bow – if one side is not tied, then the arrow cannot fly! This tension frequently arises – as exemplified in recent homiletical literature. The two main papers, presented during the conference of the *Societas Homiletica* in Washington (1999), are good examples. The theme was: *Preaching grace in the human condition*, and the two speakers represented, broadly, the two ends of the bow. Mary Catherine Hilker (a Roman-Catholic theologian) was emphatic about the fact – over-simplified – that we, in preaching, must depart primarily from the conditions of human suffering, there to seek signs of God's presence, then to point them out and to describe them as grace, as echoes of the Gospel. She also wrote a book titled: *Naming grace: Preaching and the sacramental imagination* (1998), in which she, as it were, tries to juggle two theological balls in the air. On the one hand: "*Contemporary human experience can disclose new dimensions in the story of Jesus.*" And simultaneously: "*The Gospels and the history of Jesus limit and focus the contemporary retelling of the story*" (55).

Charles Campbell was the other main speaker. Stated again without nuances: Campbell took as point of departure: "*Preaching Jesus*" (also the title of his book, 1997). According to his conviction, God also enters the condition of human suffering via preaching and, there, asks to be heard and obeyed. As post-liberal philosopher, he joins Hans Frei and states, inter alia: "*For Frei the starting point is not human experience or existence, but rather the specific, unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ, which is rendered in the interplay of character and incident in the gospel narratives*" (57). He further designs a model for narrative preaching to counter preaching that works in a cognitive-proportional way either with the biblical text, or Christian themes and dogmas, or the Christian tradition.

Various other homiletes practise their theology precisely within this tension. For example, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale wrote a book with the provocative title, *Preaching as local theology and folk art* (1997). Inter alia, she presents seven ways according to which a congregation can be exegetized to ensure contemporary preaching. Stephen Farris titled his book: *Preaching that matters* (1998), and he wrestles with exactly the same tension: to find analogies between the worlds of the text and that of the congregation (he suggests six steps), and so we could go through the homiletical list (cf e.g. also Jonker 1998 and the interesting book of Schreiter 1986). In any case, it is important that opposing exponents remain in discourse and do not reach a compromise too soon, as there is too much at stake theologically and existentially (cf Bos 1999:245).

5.5.1 Contours of contextualizing

In my opinion, the following is of importance here:

- It is of the essence for preaching to reformulate repeatedly the *language of Scripture* for the day. Thus, the mother tongue of the text is not disregarded, but indeed fully implemented. Here, the task of preaching is bilateral: to teach the congregation their mother tongue anew, and to escort them in its contemporary reformulation. In preaching, we cannot but form, or help form, local theologies, and be, ourselves, formed by it. Preaching can be so much in “biblical” language and idiom that it is virtually inconceivable for concrete people of a specific era. You can be so “correct” that you can be wrong. Sometimes, less correctness (Cicero calls it “studied untidiness”) opens the way to conceivability – which must not be viewed as an alibi for complete grammatical or homiletical slovenliness! The point is: *The gospel is conceivable*. It always comes to humans here and now (*hic et nunc*). God *adapted* Himself in the idiom of the time (cf the biblical language). Therefore, preaching cannot but be conceivable – which, however, does not mean that the complexity of life must be oversimplified. In this sense, the language of Zion/Canaan is not “holy.” It rather adopts the contours of the time, incarnates in the local congregation and environment – and so finds its target. Contextual preaching demands conceivable preaching, therefore demands an openness for the heartbeat of the present-day – which you often hear the clearest in contemporary art (literature, films, etc.). Some of the greatest epiphanies that a preacher can experience are in the art gallery or on the street (on the “market square”) among ordinary people. This incarnation of preaching’s words in the contemporary idiom, naturally, have limits: the gospel of the text always remains a *contra-gospel*, which, as such, could be regarded as contra the usual or fashion of the time (cf further 5.5.2).
- It also belongs to the essence of contextual preaching to reconsider continuously the *form of the preaching*. The fact that the biblical text is decisive for the formation of the sermon (chapter 4) does not imply that all sermons on specific texts should always have the same form. Other than the creative freedom that the text offers, the context also repeatedly demands a homiletical change of gears for a responsible variation of form within the current communicative strategies (cf Bluck 1989:32-43). Form indeed may never become a purpose in itself, but must always remain submissive to the comprehensibility of the sermon. Technique may never reign over the text and learning a number of communication strategies may never take precedence over the

labour on, and influence of, the text in preaching. You cannot and may not try to liven up the Bible with journalistic flair in order to make it “more relevant” and “lively” (Miskotte 1941:66). Yet, here lies a world that can still be developed. Such openness for the communicative environment is nothing new. It is well known that Augustine, for instance, borrowed much, dangerously much, from Cicero’s rhetorical strategies. However, he repeatedly adapted it to the nature of theology and the profile of his contemporaries (perhaps his best known: preaching as *docere*, *delectare* and *movere*: teaching, delighting and convincing; cf Den Dulk 1999:15 ff). The reality is: we live in a time in which communication takes place in radically other ways than 10 or 20 years ago. The era of the computer holds sway. Within the next five years, an unprecedented explosion in information technology will take place (cf 1.3.1). Preaching cannot but be present incarnational and enjoy its fruits. Should our communicative theories and practices congeal today in an eternal yesterday, then the writing will be on the wall for contextual preaching. Various recent homiletics are deeply under the impression of this and, for example, intentionally adapt the current communication-scientific and rhetorical strategies: Buttrick’s *Homiletic: Moves and structures* (1987) is full of it. Inter alia, he implements the way in which a good film conveys the message to the spectator when he speaks of “opening, closing, association and disassociation moves” (294 ff). The camera is used as an analogy for the way in which we observe – also at neurological level – when we “see” a picture. This has a much greater effect than mere internalization of sterile “information.” So, the one picture must follow the other also in preaching in various streamlined “moves” that contribute towards a holistic and aesthetical observation (cf also Cilliers 1998:119). To mention but another name: Eugene Lowry (1980:76 ff) works with a technique that previously was introduced in the world of theatre (the so-called *Entfremdungstechnik*): not to allow the strange, the paradoxical of the (biblical) message to congeal with various preconceived styles in preaching, but, in fact, to develop its surprising element to the end, also in the formation – on behalf of *communication-scientific contextualizing*.

- This is about, most profoundly, the *hermeneutical skills* of the preacher and of the congregation. If you do not principally think hermeneutically, then you cannot contextualize. Preaching depends much on the way in which preachers place themselves in the so-called “hermeneutical circle,” or the dialogue between text and context, and ultimately also in the discourse among the preacher, congregation and God. Earlier, I called the dialogue a “tension” (like the string of a bow). In a certain

sense, it is a tension that may never be relaxed. Theology that does not work with paradoxes is powerless. If you flatten the relationship between text and context too soon, it will reduce the bubbling of creativity. This does not mean that the Word itself does not have the power to penetrate and reform a specific context. Fortunately, all does not depend on the preacher's hermeneutical brilliance. After all, the Word, as such, is never restricted to time and, as a double-edged sword is never blunted by the wall of time limits. Therefore, in a certain sense, it is a false contradiction when preachers ask: Must we start with the text or with the situation? Already long before, God is en route to each situation, also via the text. There is no tension, the pole has been bridged; Christ was incarnated, and the Spirit has been poured out. This is so. Yet, the preacher has a hermeneutical calling, a responsibility to serve the dialogue between text and context, indeed to *point out* to the congregation this coming of God to, and his presence in, the reality (cf Cilliers 1998a). Preachers are bridge-builders, because the Bridge has been built. They are continuously en route, travellers back-and-forth between the world of the text and the world of the context. They are people who continually allow the questions of the text and the context to tune in to each other, because the Spirit is the great Tuner. Without this tuning-in, the text and context may perhaps remain deaf to one another. Yes, if you do not fulfil your hermeneutical calling, you can run the risk of preaching the "right" text for the "wrong" time, or the "wrong" text for the "right" time! Preachers who are not hermeneutically mature and sensitive, could regard texts and truths as of greater importance than people, or could allow people to reign over texts and truths. When the hermeneutics does not tally – when the text and context miss each other – then false prophesy mostly is the result. Preachers often read the hour (of God's coming) wrongly. They are not prophetically in time. Their hermeneutical calculation of time is wrong. Oh, they may well proclaim correct, timeless truths, but they are inopportune and, therefore, false. In the false prophet's mouth yesterday's theology deteriorates into today's ideology. Karl Barth (1958: 413 translated) calls such people fools:

Foolish people are always either too early or too late. They sleep when they should be awake, and are awake when they should sleep. They remain silent when they should speak and speak when it would be better to remain silent. They laugh when they should cry and cry when they should be comforted and could have laughed. They work when they must pray and pray when only work could make the difference. They consider every-

thing at the wrong time; say everything to the wrong people; do everything in the wrong direction; always choose the complicated but irrelevant things, while the simple but crucial are required. Herein lies the brilliance of foolishness.

What is demanded of us in this hour, is wisdom. This we can only learn on the lap of the congregation, who is the mother of all believers (Calvin).

5.5.2 THREE HERMENEUTICAL TRADITIONS

In my opinion, the above-named hermeneutical skills could be understood and cultivated broadly within three theological traditions, i.e. *incarnation*, *reinterpretation* and *transformation* (cf also Troeger 1999:93-95).

- *Incarnation*: In the light of Christ's incarnation (Jh 1:14), we, as preachers, cannot but regard each period as extremely serious. One recalls Karl Barth's well-known image of the preacher with the Bible in the one hand, and the newspaper in the other. We have no right to preach to people if we do not understand them or, at least, want to understand them. Christ's incarnation underlines God's way of working, his *adaptation to people*, his accommodating spirit in his revelation, his descending into our carnal existence, his "making-Himself-nothing" unto death (Phil 2:6-8). This is not about contextualism – a complete uncritical identification with humans, also in their errors and sins – but indeed about the *contingency of God's actions*: He remains creative and recreative in the course of history for, with, and in us.
- *Reinterpretation*: It is a well-known fact that Jesus, for example, not only knew the traditions of his time very well, but that He continuously relativized and radicalized them in the light of his own actions (cf e.g. Mt 5!). Traditions – or historical phases – have strong and weak points and, in my opinion, the task of preaching, inter alia, is to reinterpret repeatedly the spirit of the times in the light of God's Kingdom, to distinguish what truly is important (cf 1.2). God not only adapts to humans; his Gospel is also a stumbling block, a scandal that is averse to what is acceptable (cf 1 Cor 1:18-31). God's aesthetics often clash with those of the spirit of the time (cf Babin 1991:144 ff; also Moltmann 1971:61).



The Peruvian Christ
(date unknown)

This clash is movingly expressed in the work of art titled: *The Peruvian Christ*, a creation of the French Roman-Catholic Commission for Communication and which caused a scandal upon its first appearance. This work of art portrays a Christ that was virtually stripped of his flesh and, actually, is awful to look upon. People protested, saying: “*The Commission had no right to allow such a work of art to see the light of day. It’s not an image of Christ. It’s a frog.*” Unwittingly, they paraphrased a text from Isaiah (53:2,3): “*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*” The aesthetics of the cross reinterpret our aesthetics, that mostly is an aesthetics of the media, and therefore of beauty and success.

- *Transformation:* As preachers of the Gospel, we operate from the supposition that reality is unfinished, incomplete, “open-ended.” This supposition rests on the belief in Christ’s resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. History and the reality are not merely a never-ending mimicry in a mirror-in-a-mirror. We do not roam around in a labyrinth of eternal nonoriginals. Preaching is a hopeful deed (cf 2.3) In this sense, preaching is a *prelude* to the final and eternal game of the liberated creation together with God. Therefore, preachers of the Gospel must also relativize reality in the light of the *parousia*, and wrestle incarnationally and reinterpretingly with the reality in the hope of final transformation. Those who expect the *parousia*, play the game of preaching, indeed as *prelude* between that which is, and that which will come, in the knowledge that we are not yet there. But, because we also

already share in the end – through Christ’s resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit – this fills us with an ineffable and glorious joy (1 Pet 1:9; for the link between *preaching and play*, cf 2.6).

The question that we must now ask is: What does the (broader) context, within which preaching in South Africa takes place, look like? What is the background against which we must proclaim the Word incarnationally, reinterpretationally and transformationally? How does this context affect preaching? Naturally, it will certainly adopt unique characteristics in various congregations, but the following factors, in my opinion, are unavoidable in contemplating our (South African) context:

5.6 Contours of a specific (South African) context

A bleeding community. Inter alia, one could probably describe the South African society thus. Nine years after the transformation of South Africa into a democratic society, the country now experiences a flood of criminality as never before in its history, with crime statistics that makes your blood run cold. In fact, the chances are good that someone somewhere in South Africa will die a violent death before you have finished reading this sentence. Before you have reached the end of this page, somebody has possibly been hijacked in their own car, raped and murdered

No, unfortunately this is not an exaggeration. Every 17 seconds a woman is raped in South Africa – in the next half hour 120! In fact, one out of every three women will – should the current tendency continue – be raped in the course of their lifetime. And one out of every seven men

Reports such as the following offer scant consolation and even less of a prospect.

There is little, or no, evidence that crime, with the exception of murder, is decreasing in South Africa.

From the latest statistics provided by the South African Police Service it appears that the incidence of crime at very high levels, at most, has stabilized, but continues.

The latest annual crime statistics provided by the SAPS’s crime information and analysis centre until March this year (2000), tells a dark story. Comparative figures of the 20 most serious crimes indicate that, from 1994 (the first six months of each year) until March this year, crime has decreased in only four of the 20 categories, in nine it stabilized, and in seven it increased.

In the crime surveys done from January to March this year, it appears that already approximately 143 more crimes per 100 000 inhabitants were

committed than in 1994, and about 75 more than last year (1999). The countrywide figures have been calculated according to the population figures of 1996. All the figures were calculated per 100 000 people of the total South African population. As from 1994, murder and attempted murder has, on the whole, until now considerably decreased. On the contrary, theft with aggravating circumstances has increased.

Rape has stabilized at approximately 31,3 per 100 000. Serious assault has dramatically increased with 24,6 to 158,3. Burglary has greatly increased to nearly 29 burglaries more in the three months to date, than in 1994. However, burglary in businesses has stabilized, but is still high at 53,2.

In 1994 approximately 61,8 motorcars per 100 000 were stolen. This has now slightly decreased to 57. Fraud, falsification, misappropriation and embezzlement that had slightly decreased in 1997, 1998 and 1999, again increased to approximately two per 100 000 people to 41,4.

Crimes that have stabilized over the past six years and a few months, are the illegal possession of firearms, drug-related crimes and driving under the influence of liquor or drugs.

Thusfar, it appears that motor- and truck hijackings, bank robberies and transit robberies have, indeed stabilized during the past few years. A comparison of the latest figures with international crime tendencies was impossible, because Interpol's latest comparative figures are only until 1997 (Rapport 28 May 2000, translated).

However you interpret these statistics, this remains clear: the incidence of violence and other types of crime is still extraordinarily and unacceptably high in South Africa. One is, indeed, well aware that it could have been much worse, considering our history in South Africa. That we could have progressed in such a relatively peaceful way through the process of transformation without being embroiled in a civil war, indeed, is nothing but a miracle. That we could have progressed through this transformation within a period of a number of years, which took much longer in other countries, even centuries, is significant. Yet, our knowledge and gratitude for this may not allow ourselves to become dimly resigned to the present situation. On the contrary.

According to all indications, the above crime statistics are but the tip of the iceberg. A large percentage of crimes go unreported. Although statistics are mostly relative and even misleading, it is clear that a big screw is loose somewhere in the South African nation's system of values. What reaches the official statistics, in fact, is a mere symptom of a more profound problem, an indication that the society's norms (ethos) are crumbling, or, at least, are under huge pressure. Extreme violent crimes, but

also phenomena such as white-collar crime, fraud and a variety of related transgressions, express not only a total lack of respect for life and property, but for truth and justice.

Willie Esterhuyse's comments in this connection are food for thought:

KPMG's survey of fraud (1999) involving approximately 2000 Southern African companies, paints an extremely alarming picture

According to the survey, which interprets the word "fraud" in its broadest possible meaning, dishonest employees, especially internally, threaten companies. Personnel or employees commit no less than 75% of the identified fraud. Corruption plays a great role. Approximately 48% of the committed fraud was the result of pacts between personnel and third parties.

Companies are not optimistic that this will improve; 86% of the participants are convinced that fraud will increase. A scant 3,5% reckon that it will decrease and 7% presume that it will remain the same.

One must be wary of generalizations. It is a fact that some companies have succeeded more than others in establishing a healthy ethical culture in their firms.

However, it appears that honesty, integrity and a sense of responsibility are not virtues that feature very strongly in the world of business. With us, the concept of a "reliable employee" is under threat. The reasons for this are significant. Economic pressure being the highest percentage (71%).

Number two is something of which we cannot be proud: a total lack of adequate penal measures and the enforcement of sentences (60%). Therefore, it is not strange that the judicial system's defects are only placed third (57%).

A factor which – should it become stronger – can only have detrimental consequences for South African's developing democracy, takes fourth place. It is a deterioration of the society's values.

This is something of which we, in South Africa, are already aware. Crime indicates an erosion of respect for life, for the property and self-respect of others. Teachers, ministers, cultural leaders or politicians are no longer the role-models. Scoundrels and crooks have become the role-models for many young people. We live in times when even the minimum conditions for a moral, responsible society are being threatened. The government can do very little about this – except to ensure that the law is applied and that the penal system operates. However, a government that acts prescriptively in the field of moral values is dangerous.

Civil society and its institutions – inter alia, religious communities, educational institutions, the private sector and the media – will have to take the lead in developing our society's values and moral muscles

However, one must remember that managing through values is no quick

solution. It is a long process that demands commitment. However, it is one of the weapons against the internal saboteur (Sake Burger 17 May 2000, translated).

Criminality, indeed, is a complex problem, with many faces. The origins are divergent and could include factors such as education and peer pressure, economic backgrounds and shortcomings, psychological dysfunctioning and ideological indoctrination. Successfully combating it appears to be even more complicated. It is clear that more effective judicial processes and more stringent policing, supported by appropriate laws are indispensable. Similarly, that socio-economic factors, such as poverty and unemployment – a breeding ground for criminality – be countered with all possible means, is not negotiable.

However, exactly here South Africa wrestles with a further problem – the raw reality of Aids. Aids exacerbates the evil cycle of poverty and criminality at an unprecedented scale – and it is clear that South Africa now experiences only the beginning of its Aids pandemic. The effect that Aids will have on our country in the near future is truly frightening. It is clear that practically all sectors of society could be affected and, indeed be paralyzed: from the state machinery to the maintenance of law and order, to the private sector, to the practise of human rights, the health services and the economy – a paralysis that could contribute to pushing the country further into its downward spiral of ethical tediousness and lawlessness. The picture that was sketched at the 13th International Aids Conference in Durban is truly dark – also, and especially, as regards South Africa:

Despite its size of population, South Africa has the most HIV/Aids carriers of all countries in the world.

Of the 4,2 million sufferers 2,3 million are women – also a world record. This represents 19,2% of the country's inhabitants.

In fact, the Aids problem has exacerbated to such a degree that the 4,2 million figure was reached two years earlier than was originally predicted. Two years ago the UN predicted that there would be 3,6 million AIDS/HIV sufferers in South Africa.

By 2006, an equal number of South Africans will die of Aids-related diseases as of other causes collectively.

At the present rate, approximately 6,5 million South Africans will be HIV-positive by 2010.

The immediate threat is that millions of South Africans are on the brink of extensive conversion from their HIV status to Aids – and inevitable death.

The threat of instability that is concomitant with this state of affairs, resides therein that the country is on the brink of losing a group of people

who maintain the economy and the state and from whom the following generation of leaders must come

Social instability will increase in the absence of clear political leadership. In communities who stand before an economic crisis and lack political leadership, amidst the presence of Aids and the stigma attached to it, revolution could result

Another possible consequence is that the country and its people could fall into a state of lethargy, denial and disparagement of acceptable ethical criteria (Translated report in *Rapport*, 2 July 2000).

When considering the statistics, one should not forget that they deal with more than numbers on paper. They deal with *humans*: people with faces, names and families. People whose history of suffering could hardly be expressed in statistics or be “processed.” And, in this country with its violence, fraud, Aids and all the other kinds of human forms of suffering and degeneration, indeed, is where the church – we – are called upon to make a difference, to proclaim the *Gospel*, the good news of redemption from sin in all its addictive shapes, and obedience from gratitude

In the name of this Gospel we shall have to fight to the best of our ability to combat the dark cycle of poverty and immorality, while considering their historical *origins*. We must understand that the South Africa of today did not develop from a vacuum, but was born from a history of violence. The destructive economic *consequences* of poverty and immorality must be combated in the name of the Gospel. But, only this is not enough. *People’s attitudes, their basic dispositions, must be changed.* Individuals, but also communities, must be equipped with a new system of values, otherwise more stringent laws and changed living circumstances, sadly, will be of no avail. What is necessary, is a holistic approach to our oppressive South African problem, an approach in which the media, education, private sector, but also the church, and then specifically also the proclamation in, and of, the church has a particular role to play.

5.7 Confession of guilt – a cry for a new South Africa

The question now is: How must the church – and ministers – react to such a context? In my opinion, at least in two ways. Firstly – and I know this is not a popular way – by proclaiming sin só that it leads to true *confession of guilt*, and secondly – by preaching the commandment of love for your neighbour só that it leads to obedience in, and *sanctification of, the entire South African reality.*

Firstly, we thus attend to the proclamation of sin and the confession of

guilt. The law and the Gospel remain means in God's hand that He uses as and when He pleases, *inter alia*, also to awaken our awareness of sin. However, we, as preachers, must truly understand one thing: *we* cannot, in any way, "produce" or manipulate" an awareness of sin in people. Emotional declarations and reactions are not necessarily synonymous with a true awareness of sin. Only the *Spirit* convinces one of sin, righteousness and judgement (Jh 16:8). Naturally, people will react differently to this sin-convincing work of the Spirit. There is no recipe or method that can be prescribed.

However one reacts – the result of a profound conviction of sin will be a *transformation of attitude and deed* and, in fact, not only temporarily, but continuously. Those who become aware of their sin, call for mercy, for transformation and this appeal becomes a way of life. This is far more than just a one-off and superficial emotion of remorse, rather a daily penance (Luther).

Should we wish to see a true transformation in the South African society, then we must preach the full implications of the law in its primary function. This is not an easy route. Sin has never been a popular word. But sin is a reality that affects all our human actions universally, makes us guilty before God and towards each other, that has power over our lives, which we mostly do not even begin to understand. Yes, *we have not yet considered well how heavy the weight of our sin is* (Anselmus).

Therefore, there is room for true judgement preaching as a form of law preaching, on condition that it is understood within its theological framework. "Judgement-preaching" that, for example, is based on a rigid law-Gospel scheme (to "make" sinners before you can "transform" them into being redeemed), or merely express petty bourgeois or contemporary criticism without placing it in the light of God's judgement, does more harm than good. It only strengthens our moralistic delusion of self-restoration.

Sin results in our wanting to shunt God out of our lives, to eliminate Him, and in the pride of ourselves, wanting to become God. This tendency of wanting to sit on God's throne, is in our deepest being, in our fibres, in our blood. Therefore, preaching of the law will not but be able to reveal only the *fact* of sin, but also its terrible *power*. And the *preacher* of the law cannot but call out in the act of preaching or, at least, preach from such a basic disposition: *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* (my guilt, my greatest guilt).

However, the tragedy is that we naturally resist all forms of revealing our sinful self. We would rather wash our hands in innocence – alas, a ritual of which we in South Africa are well aware. But, this we must understand: if we wish to preach ethics that can bring about *true transformation*, then we shall not be able to avoid this fundamental step of proclaiming sin and confession of guilt. We may not preach sin only superficially, but from

its deepest theological background and from the knowledge that each word that also crosses our lips is unclean by nature, and that we live among a people whose every word is unclean (Isa 6:5).

Our calling as preachers is to cleave to the bone the human situation, and therefore, also that of the South African person – and to know that the sharp double-edged sword first cuts ourselves to pieces. We cannot merely stand on the pulpit with psychological, sociological, or existential-philosophical analyses of the human existence – how important and indispensable it may be – but we shall have to go on to the existence of humans before God (*coram Deo*). In addition, in preaching, we shall not only focus on the *individual person* in his/her inner-religious experience, but also on the person in his/her relationship to the *contemporary powers, the institutions and structures of South African society*, and the manifestations of sin in all these inter-connections.

A further issue against which we, as “church people,” also as “official preachers,” must be vigilant against, is to think that preaching the law should be directed only at non-believers. No, also (especially!) believers must repeatedly be driven to Christ in the light of the law. Our *whole life*, after all, is penance – which does not mean that we miss the joy of redemption, but rather that our joy remains deep and genuine. We may repeatedly experience, as simultaneously justified and sinner (*simul justus et peccator*) that our wretched call: “*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*” will lead to “*Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Rom 7:24,25).

To confess your guilt remains one of the most hopeful things that a person can do. *After all, it is a sign that you have reached the end of your tether and have started to see a glimmer of God’s mercy.* Therefore, it is also a basis upon which we can begin to build a truly new South Africa, on which we can begin to weave a tapestry of a morally healthier society. To confess our guilt to God, but also honestly to each other, and to pray for each other – therein lies our moral health (cf Jas 5:16). Therein lies the seed of our hope, lies the birth of a new world

To confess guilt is not a cry in a void on our path, but is a call to a merciful address, a beseeching that God Himself, on the grounds of his love, again will start with us anew: *Kyrie, eleison! Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us ...* (Ps 123:3). *Kyrie, eleison!*

Before the sun sets over South Africa

Secondly we note:

5.8 Sanctification of life

People who have been saved from sin *cannot but* respond in gratitude. This makes them visibly different as redeemed and grateful sinners. Wherein this difference precisely lies, and especially how its working must be understood, is not a simple matter – a fact proven by many (sometimes divergent) perceptions that originated around this point over the centuries of church history.

Christian morality (gratitude) is unique, i.e. it is clearly distinguishable from an ordinary civil morality, although, naturally, there will be certain mutual levels. But, in what does the uniqueness of Christian morality then lie?

In my opinion, herein: it deals with the *sanctification of concrete and everyday life*, not with a “spiritual” level above life, or merely an introspective entry to the inner condition of the human soul. In fact, it could be fixed as a kind of rule: When one concentrates on the *inner* condition of a person in a moralistic way, then a departure from the *external*, from the concrete, everyday reality takes place (for examples cf 6.9).

Sanctification, in the Reformed sense of the word, on the contrary, deals with the sanctification of the entire life. It does not transport us away to the supernatural but sends us back to earth, which God’s actions sanctified in the creation and recreation. Yes, God’s mercy saves us from *sin*, not from *nature* (as God’s good creation), and therefore not from the everyday life. It rather binds us to it. “*Before God there is no life that is not worth living. For God, life itself, after all, is of great value*” (Bonhoeffer, translated).

The Lord Jesus teaches us this, *inter alia*, in the Our Father. That God is interested in even our daily bread. That He is also the God of the so-called “little things” of our lives. Sillevs-Smit (*s.a.*, translated) writes beautifully:

Jesus says: Take the liberty of going to your heavenly Father with your plate of food. And, by this, the Lord implies: there is nothing that you cannot take to your heavenly Father. Ask God for shoes and clothes. Ask Him for a house and furniture. Go to Him with your work and your vacation. Tell Him about your need for love, your desire to marry, your yearning for a child. Show Him your pain and anxiety. Show Him your empty purse and bare pantry. Speak to Him about high prices and the difficult work that you cannot do

God is not a God who is distant and strange, sitting high on his heavenly throne. God is a God close by, who lives with us and who wants to supply in all our needs. There is no thirst that He does not want to quench. There is no hunger that he cannot satisfy.

With this prayer, Jesus leads God into our homes, into our lounge; He brings God to our office, into the factory, onto the field where we work. We do not have a Sunday faith. Our God is: Lord of every day and of every-day life. He is not only God of the church or of the inner room, but God is also in the street, in the middle of traffic, in the barracks and on the ship, in the house and in the veld, in the factory and in the market.

Those who receive their bread daily from God's hand, however, also learn a particular openness toward the starving. One could hardly say: Give us today *our* daily bread, and grudgingly keep the bread on your own table. Because our possessions are not our own, and because we know that the Father will care for us, we must open our hands to give to others. The bread on our plate "belongs" also to our neighbour. Those who pray: "Give us ..." must indeed also give to others.

Martin Luther said:

We are thieves and robbers if we cling so to our own bread that we say to the beggar: I worked for the bread in my house. You must care for yourself. If I do not feed this needy person, then my goods become stolen and robbed objects, also when they have not been robbed or stolen. In that way, I become a thief because of my own possessions, because I do not serve anybody with them. There are two types of robbers: those that steal ... and those that use their own possessions like thieves.

The prayer for bread, indeed, has become extremely serious in our world with its starvation and its millions of undernourished people, especially children. It affects also us in this country with its chronic poverty. We can hardly pray the Our Father untouched when our tables groan under a load of delicacies, while millions of little stomachs cry out for a crumb. Therefore, the things that we "have," that we have received from God, must also easily leave our hands. Therefore, we must learn a certain soberness, a soberness that, at least, is prepared to give up our luxuries and, if necessary, even more. In fact, this soberness in the prayer strikes us: it is about the portion of bread for today, nothing more and nothing less. What God gives more than that, is cause for *gratitude* to Him and *servitude* to others.

This, indeed, is the gratitude and servitude that goes so against our sinful grain, that we have difficulty in accepting it. We enjoy God's bread without a glance above or a thought for others. It's every person for him-/herself! We indeed need grace to reverse this sinful introversion, to transform us towards gratitude and servitude. We need the Holy Spirit to teach us a new style, to force open our hardened hearts and clenched hands. We

need the Holy Spirit to say: *Abba, Father!* and to say: *Fellow human being, brother, sister!* This prayer that is practically in the middle of the Our Father, severs hyper-spirituality at the root. This prayer teaches us, inter alia, that an inhuman Christian is a contradiction; that God does not wish to make angels of us, but humans, true humans – for other people!

Therefore, one does not find “good people” in the church, and “bad people” outside the church. The “world outside” is not necessarily evil, and the “children of the Lord” here inside are not without sin. In fact, the only difference between the church and the world is that the church is aware of its own godlessness, and the world is not (Barth). In no way may the church elevate itself above, or attempt to flee from, the world.

This was the Pharisees’ basic fault. Within the law they stood contrary to grace, and “above” the rest of the sinners. They wanted to be *seen* – a caricature of the fact that they had to *shine* as lights in the dark. In fact, Pharisaism is nothing but a masquerade against God and his grace, because the law is lifted out of its links with God and his grace and now is implemented as a merciless cane against others who are “not up to standard.” Pharisaism is no ancient phenomenon. On the contrary, it is very much alive – especially in the church. However, it is much more dangerous than other “evil” transgressions, precisely because it knows much about God’s grace, but misunderstands it as a mere *phase* which (gradually) lies behind you. Because it reckons: we have received grace, but now everything further depends on us. Truly, to want to be *different* on this basis, is light years removed from the biblical vision on the church as being “different”

Wherein does the church’s “being different” lie? It always has a kind of tension. This, for example, is evident when Paul writes: “*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things* (Col 3:1,2).

This declaration is not only a striking example of Paul’s philosophy, but of the Gospel’s own structure. The word *since* refers to what God has already done, to completed salvific facts, to God’s great deeds in Christ – on our behalf. Here Paul makes a list of these deeds, as in many other places in his letters – not for self-control, but for expressions of gratitude and commitment. For example:

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ ... (Col 3:3,1). And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6). When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col 3:4). And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified (Rom 8:30).

This is set! This is history! Past tense! Therefore ... we aspire and direct ourselves above! One can sense the tension in the text, a tension that is also part of our lives of faith from beginning to end, *a tension that still accompanies our salvation*. Some call it a tension between the *already* and the *not yet*. We already have everything Yet, not yet! Others speak of the tension of believers *between the times* of the first and the second coming of Jesus. Somewhere, Karl Barth says: It is not the tension of people who still have to seek everything, but of people that have found all – and therefore must still seek! Paul describes it strikingly elsewhere: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me* (Phil 3:12). I grab hold of this, because I have already been grabbed!

This tension may never be defused, in any case not in this dispensation. The false teachers of Colossians tried to do so by overemphasizing mundane, legalistic rules. However, one could erroneously try to defuse the tension towards the other side and thus actually turn it into a caricature. You can try to be more spiritual than the Gospel – by *avoiding* the mundane, that is the world. Like the church father who had his little house built on a wooden structure several metres above the ground. There he lived for many years and received his provisions by means of a pulley. He saw nobody and made sure nobody ever saw him. With his head in the clouds, away from this earth, he thought he would become holier than other earthlings.

Did he? I don't know. What I do know is that the Gospel will not turn me into a resident on a cloud or an angel on a pole. The tension of salvation plants my feet firmly on this earth. After all, it is God's earth. Is this earth not also a space in which God works? And, is our end destination not indeed also the new *earth*? New, but still *earth*! We must – in the name of heaven – also be liberated from our "spirituality." However, this is the most difficult thing from which to be liberated

When Paul says: *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things* (Col 3:2), he obviously does not mean that one should avoid the world. In fact, shortly thereafter, Paul again makes a list, and he begins to discuss extensively the most concrete, one could say our most mundane relationships. On his list is the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, slaves and owners (Col 3:18-4:1). Because the Gospel is all about our everyday so-called prosaics – politics, ethics and the economy. It is all about this *earth* and the *people* on this earth. The Gospel is about that which is beautiful, and which you may just enjoy. In fact, if you have not enjoyed something today, then you have not yet been within God's will (according to Rabbi Akiba).

The difference between Paul's list of appeals and that of the heretic

teachers is the fact that they are exactly opposite: they wanted to get to heaven by concentrating on the earth; the Gospel reclaims the earth by concentrating on heaven. The Gospel allows us first to taste heaven, but so that we can return to the earth! That is what Christians are: heaven seekers on earth, for the earth. Strivers to heaven, people directed to heaven – but also focusing fully on earth, because it is *God's* earth. After all, Jesus became *human*, not an angel or a spirit. He saves us also to become *human*, true human beings, thus Christians. *We must never attempt to be more spiritual than Jesus.* By his incarnation, He emphasized the value of being human. By his coming to earth, He acknowledged the value of the world. *How beautiful the earth, it has much value!* Jesus brings heaven to earth. Therefore, we are earthlings who actually are “heavenlings” and heavenlings who actually are earthlings. Earthly heavenlings and heavenly earthlings. Such are we.

This is the tension of our salvation. (Adapted and translated from Cilliers 1999).

It cannot be emphasized enough: the Gospel does not remove us from our “worldly possessions,” but rather fills the worldly possessions with a new meaning.

The servant who sweeps her kitchen, does the will of God in the same measure as a monk who prays – not because she sings a Christian song while she sweeps, but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting small crosses on his shoes, but because he makes good shoes, because God is interested in good workmanship (Luther).

We must really guard against clericalizing our faith, or wanting to clericalize our calling – as though faith can only exist within the walls of the church, and our calling can only be “official.” The choice may never be whether you continue with your daily work or whether you go to “work full-time for the Lord.” After all, we are called upon to honour the Lord in everything that we do (1 Cor 10:31).

Therefore, good works of faith are not (necessarily) extraordinary, spectacular works, but what is obvious in faith, because it is possible in faith. People need not see such good works, but they are acceptable to God and known to Him. To live a holy life is to do ordinarily (!) what your hand finds to do despite it appearing to be little and insignificant.

We are called to *follow* Jesus in the concrete existence of every day. This following Christ however, is not synonymous with a mere imitation (*imitatio*) of Christ. We simply cannot duplicate Christ's natural life, cannot imitate Him in external things, but neither can we fulfil the example of his “inner” fulfilling of the law. Jesus' life is not merely an *illustration* of the

law, and his fulfilling thereof our moral ideal. *To follow Christ in the everyday life is to live in a relationship with Him, through his Spirit, in the concrete reality.*

Thus, it is not merely the pursuance of an ideal somewhere, far ahead, but a lifestyle, based on the presence of the living Christ, here and now. It is a life in obedience, from grace – in everyday details. To follow Christ, i.e. to walk in his footprints, does not entail the application of a number of religious techniques directed at yourself, but in squarely facing the daily humdrum, and living in the presence of Christ in this, the daily humdrum, so that God might be honoured in all things.

However, sanctification of life and following Christ is not only about *small things*, but also about the *greater coherence of the society*. Every millimetre of life and reality, after all, belongs to Christ. In the light of Christ's resurrection and the pouring out of his Spirit, the commandment for life, the entire life, becomes radical and universal. Therefore, Christ's followers cannot, may not, accept a deterioration of society. On the contrary, the *consciences* of those who have experienced redemption from sin are touched regarding their neighbours' suffering, as well as the suffering and evil concealed in the *structures* of society. Those who have "tasted" the Gospel, cannot but wrestle with humanity in an alliance of guilt about ethical issues such as poverty and ecology, Aids and violence – in short, with all that threatens this earth, and, in our case, South Africa.

To repeat our question: Why must we address ethical issues too in preaching? *Because the Gospel teaches that God loves the earth.* Herein lies the sum total and meaning of all our ethical actions. Should we ask how we must preach about ethics in the South African situation, the answer in brief would be: by preaching the commandment of love. *Ultimately, a humanistic or social programme will not save South Africa from dehumanization, but the proclamation and application of the commandment of love by the church in South Africa.*

This might sound too simple, and it is indeed, simple. The commandment for this hour in South Africa truly is not complicated. On the contrary, it is crystal clear. It is hearing from the Lord's mouth: *Go and do likewise* (Lk 10:37b). However, we have this tendency, especially in our religion, to change what is simple into a complicated theory, change it into a question behind which we can hide comfortably from the commandment for obedience: *And who is my neighbour?* (Lk 10:29b).

Jesus looks right through this question. He unmasks it as a skilful escapist mechanism, an escape in abstraction and theoreticizing. With a good dose of humour and self-knowledge, Robert McAfee Brown (1984:107) writes about this:

“By asking the question that way, the lawyer gets the discussion back into safe territory. The discussion need not involve being a neighbour but only defining a neighbour.... It is the kind of terrain on which lawyers excel.

“Let us explore the lawyer’s inner reflections: should the discussion prove fruitful, perhaps a symposium can be organized around a theme like ‘The Concept of Neighbourliness’ and a really comprehensive definition arrived at... There could be a series of papers: ‘The Stoic Concept of Neighbourliness’, ‘Neighbourliness in Recent Mid-East Fiction (a very short paper), ‘The Cultural Implications of Neighborliness for Improving Trade Relations with Greece’, ‘Neighborliness: A Woman’s Perspective’ (written by a man in order to maintain the desired objectivity), and finally, tapping the local Ph.D thesis market, ‘Neighborliness as Seen by Members of the Slave Class, Being a Series of Interviews Conducted in the Alexandrian Slave Market for the Purpose of Attaining Contemporary Data on Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Ratios.’ The papers (the lawyer continues to reflect) could then be published, perhaps edited by the lawyer himself, and the contributors could add the volume to their list of publications as a way of assuring that they get academic tenure – rather than their neighbours.”

But, there is no escape. The Gospel is clear about this: *Be a neighbour to others*

In fact, the church exists on behalf of the neighbour. Therefore, in our “sanctification” we may not keep turning like a moth around a candle of our own, inner experiences, so keep turning around the light of our abilities or the misery of our shortcomings, that we simply do not have the time or energy to love our neighbours and thus fulfil God’s law. Briefly: we may not be so busy with ourselves, become so in love with ourselves that we no longer *love* our neighbours

Now, it has again become time for a sermon-analytical tour, a tour that tragically illustrates that we, also in South Africa, have not truly understood the above-named points of departure in our preaching

5.9 Examples of sermons of a failed (moralistic) vision on the congregation

*There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God (Rom 3:10b-11).*

Thus, Scripture describes humans in their being totally doomed before God, a description that probably would be confirmed *theoretically* by the

majority of preachers. However, unfortunately, this does not mean that it necessarily functions as a supposition in the *practice* of preaching. On the contrary, the variety of forms of semi-pelagianism or even full-blooded Pelagianism or Arminianism (doctrines that all, to a lesser or greater degree, accept that humans do have the ability to cooperate in their ultimately attaining salvation, and thus are not totally corrupted by sin) that are at work in preaching is simply shocking. The reasons for this could be divergent and could also be a complex combination of various factors. As we have already seen, one of these is the change of biblical-theological declarations into anthropological declarations (cf 3.7.4). When God's actual deeds, of which the biblical text testifies, are no longer expressed today, then it is almost obvious that preachers will revert to proclaiming various imperatives that demand people's actions. At most, the indicative of salvation can still be maintained in respect of God's deeds in a biblical text, but when the focus is on the present congregation, they become the subject, the source of these salvific acts. By implication, such sermons say: God has indeed acted in the historical indicative of the biblical text, but that completed his actions. Now, it is the humans' turn. Now, humans have all the responsibility. The indicative-imperative scheme is then stereotyped as synonymous to the sequence: God's actions – our actions. This is a common theological short-circuit, a legalistic misunderstanding that has taken revenge in innumerable sermons. This short-circuit continues to flow profoundly from a *doubtful view of what sin is*.

5.9.1 SIN? CONFESSION OF GUILT?

Indeed, there are often legalistic sermons that mention human sin – and extensively so! This takes place at various levels, of which I name but three. Firstly, there is the tendency to disguise the reality of one's own sin and guilt by blaming it on somebody or something else. In fact, there *is* sin and guilt, but it is not *our* sin and guilt. Secondly, it is accepted that humans do have a problem, possibly illness, but not that they die as a result of their transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1). Here, symptoms are pointed out, without squarely facing the deeper-lying grounds of sin. Thirdly, the point of departure triumphs that humans themselves are able to find a way out of sin. Sin is made harmless and the possibility for the annulment thereof is based on the potential of the religious person.

5.9.1.1 Denial

As an illustration of the first level of proclaiming sin – actually, a denial thereof – I quote a single sentence from a sermon on 1 Corinthians 6:12–

20: “*The Christians in the city of Corinth, like us today, were living in a society where immorality was not considered to be wrong. And, like us, they were also being influenced by the standards that prevailed in their society.*”

Seen as such, this declaration naturally does contain elements of truth. The society – context – influences all of us thoroughly. However, the context within which this declaration functions, brings about that it attains a particular meaning, namely to prepare the table for prescriptions that follow. The greatest part of the sermon thereafter spells out the rules that young people must obey to withstand this threat, but the listeners are not sketched at all as people who, because of their sin, are not able to offer resistance and therefore need the salvific work of the Gospel. The structure of the sermon revolves on two hinges, namely, on the one hand, the external threat and, on the other, a presumed capacity to resist the threat. In order to allow the first hinge to function, the preacher makes use of the rhetoric technique, that linguists call pacification and/or nominalization (cf Kress & Hodge 1979:72 ff). When such linguistic transformations appear in texts, it is usually an indication that the writer, or, in this case, the preacher, wishes to disguise the action of certain main agents and wishes to transfer the attention to other external agents – a technique that is often implemented in service of ideology formation. The effect is to dull the feeling of activity, to eliminate complicity to actions and to transform processes into objects. The cause of the guilt then lies elsewhere, and the necessity for a radical salvation expires.

5.9.1.2 *Superficialization*

As regards the second level of proclamation of sin, I refer to a sermon on the well-known parable of the lost son in which the preacher, justifiably, allows the light also, and especially, to fall on the older brother (Lk 15:25-32). The preacher formulates the problem of this brother thus: “*...the tragedy of the older brother was that he had a great father but he himself did not become great.*”

This offers the first indication of a hermeneutical objective – to lead the listeners to the point that they also, like the older brother, can become “great.” This is an indication of stature. The sermon continues and describes the elder brother’s problem further:

The younger brother is sunken into iniquity but the older brother is weary of well-doing and he’s just lost the freshness of his Christian life. This older brother has somehow found that his joy as a Christian has waned. But our Lord acknowledges that behind all this there is a basic sincerity that has kept this man flagging on, on the farm, throughout his life.

The elder brother (an image of the Pharisees) becomes the prototype of a Christian who (no longer) is up to standard. His only sin is his laxity. Inherently he is a good person – “far from perfect,” admits the preacher further, but with a “basic sincerity.” He even presents this brother as one who was “mature in the church.” He was just “weary and jaded and tired.” The preacher follows this problem statement up with the usual list of things that the Lord is prepared to do to solve the problem (“... He who would so willingly give ...”), but this cannot yet happen before the person with his basic virtue has shaken off his weariness and has returned from “the far country of disillusionment and weariness and meaninglessness.” Such a person does not really need redemption. With his/her own actions he/she puts all in order again, and that which belongs to the Father again becomes his/her property. At the end of the service, the preacher prays: *“Thank You Father; that when our hearts are broken and contrite ... everything that you have is ours.”* The biblical text, indeed, does not say this. The older brother’s heart was – as far as we know – not broken. But, more important: the brokenness of his heart also was not a precondition before the Father could say: *“... everything I have is yours”* (Lk 15:31).

5.9.1.3 Nullification

The third level upon which proclamation of sin often takes place, appears strikingly in a sermon on Ephesians 4:11-16. The preacher begins with a sketch of a scene that sometimes takes place in nature: an eagle’s inherent nature is to be free, it’s a bird “that can hover in the air with its beautiful wings.” Placed in a cage, it adopts “another nature,” namely that which adapts to imprisonment. Should such an eagle’s cage, for example, be left open, it frequently happens that it does not fly away, but remains in its incarceration. Its “other” nature (here an image of our sinful nature) prevents it from living according to its inherent nature. This metaphor is theologically suspect. Our inherent nature indeed is our sinful nature, not so? We have been “conceived and born in sin”! We do not have a natural state to which we must or can return to be again “just normal.” In fact, the preacher says: “We were born as humans and have a sinful nature ...” but apparently the implication is that we must discard this sinful, “other” nature to again adopt our inherent nature. How do we do this? Precisely as the eagle did it! *“It took a long time before, one day, eagles flew over this house and when this eagle heard the cries of the eagles flying over it, then it realized: but that is how I should be. And then only the eagle soared forth, as it were, from its own incarceration.”*

The preacher, indeed, admits that it was not an easy process. It took the eagle a long time to relearn its freedom. But, the point is: ultimately it lib-

erated itself from its imprisonment. “We are no different,” says the preacher. We have a sinful nature, but we have the ability to return to our origins, our inherent nature, which, in essence, is unharmed. This returning process the preacher describes as follows: “*But when we arrive at the Lord, then something wonderful has happened. He has made us new. But, do you know, then we must often still learn to break out of this natural cage to begin what we are in the Lord.*”

The agent who breaks the bars of the cage remains the human being. The conditional construction *if we ... then* after all means: something wonderful cannot happen before a person allows it to happen. It is the human being who (from the cage) must arrive at the Lord, who must learn to do it, but not even always – only frequently. Therefore, it is quite logical for the sermon to be heavily laden further with announcements of all that the Lord wishes to do and with all that the listeners must do in order to be a fully mature person, as perfect and mature as Christ (Eph 4:13). The derailed concept of sin (hamartology) at the beginning of the sermon leads to the loss of the concept of salvation (soteriology) in the rest of the sermon.

5.9.2 THE ENNOBLING OF THE RELIGIOUS PERSON

In sermons of this nature, Christ indeed is not truly necessary. Holy, exemplary characters and moral norms, against which people must measure themselves and to which they must aspire, come in His place. The Gospel itself is misunderstood as an appeal for moral improvement – an improvement that people themselves, from the reserves of their religious potential, can effect. Often the norms that are presented and to which people must conform are nothing but the contemporary, civil morality or, if this has degenerated, the aspirations and presentations of such a morality. Then the objective of the sermon is merely that people become decent citizens of society, people with a basic and average sincerity. One could say: legalistic sermons have the objective to help already religious people to become more religious, to contribute to their ennobling. It erroneously presumes that people are able to obey God’s law, if they just truly want to do so and just try hard enough. However, the truth is that we cannot, even if we wanted to do so! What we in South Africa need is not merely nice, good citizens – although this certainly wouldn’t be bad! The fact is just that these nice, good people will not remain so in the shorter or longer term. For that, our sin is too deeply rooted. And especially: for this we do not need moral training programmes, but the Gospel.

The failure to appreciate the reality of sin mostly is not deliberate, but rather subtle and unconscious. It so easily slips into our language. Switch

the points a fraction – but then remove the consolation of the Gospel. For example, as regards the parable of the golden coins (Mt 25:14-30), when a preacher says: *“As He that came to serve people by helping them to correct their relationship with God and to live liberated from the power of sin, they must also be in the service of their neighbours,”* then this is the centuries-old phenomenon of semi-pelagianism that raises its head. Jesus becomes an empowerment principle for Christian activity, One that must help us to (further) liberate ourselves from the power of sin. We liberate ourselves (to attain the right relationship with God) and therefore we, ourselves, become our fellowmen’s servants.

Such examples indeed teem in the sermons. When, in a meditation on 1 Corinthians 13, a preacher declares: *“We are creatures of love, our basic nature is that of a loving nature,”* then this is an attempt to point out our original creational constitution. However, the fatal mistake that he then makes, on the basis thereof is to appeal to the listeners to live according to this creational constitution – as though no Fall had taken place! In such a case, 1 Corinthians 13 becomes a law that must drive me back to my basic nature, not a commandment by which I, as a saved human, may live in gratitude. Therefore, sentences such as the following are perfectly logical: *“Every day I must assess the previous time against my Christian calling, especially with regard to the calling of love, and improve my life according to Jesus’ will. This is not easy. Let us try this evening to start this conversion in our lives so that tomorrow can be a more beautiful day at home and at work.”* Renewal is changed into “improvement,” and God’s grace into “let us try.” It is we who start the conversion in our lives. Not God.

The final sentence of a meditation that, ironically, indeed intends to point out the seriousness of sin, is in respect of Joshua 7: “Get rid of all the causative factors that make you fall, and allow the Holy Spirit to lay his finger on the place that causes a crisis. Annihilate that part of your life – crucify it.” In this syntax the one who takes and keeps the initiative is nobody else but a human being – a fact that the sermon continuously confirms. It is a human being who does everything that the Holy Spirit and Jesus alone can do, who allows God to act, who gets rid of sin ... and ultimately crucifies it. *The salvific work of Christ, the Crucified, principally is not necessary.*

5.9.3 THE MOVEMENT TO THE INTRA-PSYCHICAL

A significant tendency of sermons with an anthropocentric approach is their movement away from the biblical text to the human inner life. Often the inner emotions of biblical figures are sketched – mostly with a good quota of the preacher’s contribution to the text! This they do with the specific objective of evoking from the listeners’ their similar emotions, or,

should the biblical figure function as a negative example, to deter listeners from such an attitude. Whatever the case, the focus of the sermon remains trapped within the space of the intra-psychic.

In a sermon on Acts 1:8 and Romans 1:8-17, it is significant how often the preacher descends to the depths of the human psyche. In fact, he practises what we could call a theology of the most profound piety. Everything is deep ... or deeper – almost as in the mysticism of the Middle Ages. So we repeatedly hear of Paul, the preacher or the listeners coming under a “the deep impression,” of their calls to God “from the heart,” their preparedness in the “spirit” and in “disposition,” their “deepest emotions” and “desires,” etcetera. That the preacher indeed desires his listeners to imitate Paul’s inner disposition is apparent from sentences such as the following: *“And then we see that Paul was prepared in his heart. His heart was prepared. In his heart there was a deep desire ... a deep longing. This had to happen.”*

Alas, even profound psychology can become a self-preparation for salvation, a way in which I, myself, must apply soul hygiene. The better the hygiene, the more certain the salvation. And vice versa

The tragedy of legalistic preaching is that it often takes things that, as such, are not wrong and employs them to serve self-righteousness. For example, faith can thus be changed into good works, the “being quiet” of humans before God can become a source of justification, or ethical activities to which people are called can be presented as natural potential. Often it is the small, ostensibly innocent words that tear God’s actions and our actions apart in a legalistic way, that substantiates and claims that which is only conceivable in the dynamic relation between God and humans.

5.9.4 LEGALISM AND REALITY

Where God enters into a relationship with humans, the reality within which humans live, is radically changed – because God has radically changed it and is still busy with it, also by means of the person with whom He has entered into a relationship. To this effect, a remarkable similarity between virtually all legalistic preaching is evident, namely the consistent loss of reality, in the sense that it avoids reality. This actually is logical: legalistic sermons may seemingly be directed to the present and reality, but yet it is not true to it, because there are no truly transforming powers working therein. God does not work in legalistic sermons. Therefore, it misses the reality; it is unreal, i.e. non-contextual.

But, as we have repeatedly emphasized in this chapter: preaching depends greatly, indeed fully, on its connection to the reality. Herein lies the concreteness, the actuality of preaching: that it declares God’s workings here and now. Legalistic sermons shift God’s actions either back to the past

or ahead to the future. They do not address the factual person in his/her social, economic, political, church, cultural and gender contexts in the presence of God, but remain abstract and timeless, i.e. untrue to the world. They remain especially also untrue to the Gospel, because the Gospel always has a specific address, moment, *kairos* in which it works in order to transform reality. On this, the Reformed indeed placed strong emphasis, namely that the objective of preaching is our transformation, which takes place on the basis of God's salvific deed in Christ and through the application of the reality of salvation through the Holy Spirit in, and to, humans. Thus, this is in no way people's responsibility, but remains God's work that creates its own listeners, its own obedience to its own claims by means of his Word.

However, God incorporates humans in his transforming and renewing work in the world. Not only does the *power* for transformation come to humans, but also the *way* in which this transformation can manifest in their lives. God does not save people to just leave them to their own mercy as regards the internalizing of salvation in their concrete lives. Should the law (here meaning the command to a life in obedience, or *tertius usus legis*) be proclaimed as it should be, i.e. within the framework of the Gospel, then it still offers the best way in which this Gospel can be existentialized. The law is nothing but a necessary form of the Gospel, the content of which is grace (Barth 1935:11). Or, in other words: in the Spirit, the law returns in the form of the Gospel (Van Ruler 1974:526 ff).

In legalistic sermons this essential connection between the law and the Gospel is torn apart, with the result that the Gospel is spiritualized, on the one hand, and the law is moralized on the other, as we have frequently seen. Both processes consequently contribute to preaching that is alien to reality, i.e. incontextual preaching.

5.9.4.1 The spiritualization of the Gospel

The sermons that I have examined contain many examples of world avoidance (incontextuality). I quote from a meditation on James 4:13-15:

Time is valuable – just ask a businessman what an hour costs him. Yet, we use our time as though it is valueless. Time has no future, but just a past because we have no guarantee that we will live in the next moment. We can indeed look back to what we did with our time. Time is often like disposable products. You use them only once and then they are unusable. We must use time with wisdom. It must be used not only to be filled with the temporary, such as food and clothes and other mundane needs such as sport and recreation, but should be filled with other aspects that have eternal value, such

as your relationship with God, reading the Bible, praying, going to church, helping or supporting others, or spending time with your spouse, children and other relatives.

Conclusion: temporary things do not have eternal value. But why then did Christ come in the time?

This spiritualization of the Gospel appears in some or other form in virtually all moralistic sermons. I refer to a sermon on 1 John 2:18-27. It seems as though the sermon addresses relevant themes, also makes lavish use of concepts that had a particular relevance in 1995, in the “new South Africa,” for example, “inauguration,” “empower ... – this of course is the fashionable verb in our time,” “risqué magazines,” “Constitutional meetings,” trade union or personnel meetings,” human rights,” “Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP),” “Christian religion in our schools,” “new laws,” etcetera. But those who delve deeper into the sermon, quickly discover the stereotype dualism that characterises this and other legalistic sermons. From the outset, human rights are situated contrary to the rights of the Saviour, the RDP contrary to offerings to the Lord and the giving of spiritual gifts (“We as Christians do not need a RDP”), etcetera. Throughout the sermon the preacher contrasts new South African realities to so-called “spiritual” realities, and further radicalizes the contrast by pouring all of it into an apocalyptical framework: we live in South Africa in the last hour, in which antichrist powers act, yes the devil himself (cf also 3.7.5). The “solution” is a simplistic “recipe” [sic], namely that we must again attain a Pentecostal standard, a standard, however, that transports us from the challenging and concrete realities around us. On close inspection, legalistic sermons, in some or other way, always offer simplistic solutions – do a, and b will follow. This makes listeners either pent up or hopeless if the recipe does not work in their case – which often happens.

Simplistic solutions do not keep count of the complexity of reality and, at most, implement the latter as a runway to proclaim the “spiritual things” of the Gospel. Time and again, this is evident in moralistic sermons: relevant issues are indeed introduced in the sermons, but merely as a type of “décor” against which the “spiritual” Gospel is brought on stage. The issues are not addressed content-wise nor are they positively filled with the promise of the transformative power of the Gospel, but are rather viewed as its counter-pole. To me, this is failed actualization.

As I have stated, it seems obvious that quite a number of sermons indeed deal with relevant South African issues. However, what was evident from the analysis of these sermons is the tendency to introduce the situation in South Africa as a type of list of complaints at the beginning of the sermon,

and then to implement them as a springboard to an internalized religion, a religion which does not offer much hope other than that people must “improve” South Africa via a list of religious rules. The list of complaints at the beginning of the sermon complements a moralistic doing-list at the end of the sermon, as in the sermon on 2 Corinthians 4:8,9,17-18:

Many people thought that if another political party came into power in our country, we would experience a kind of Utopia. That everything would go right. We quickly discovered: this is not so. Every day, we hear of:

- *Rapes*
- *Murders of police*
- *Violence*
- *Motor hijacking, and*
- *Robbery.*

And the question is: What next?

But how would Paul have reacted to all these things? Paul said: I do not lose hope. And this is the message that I wish to bring home to you this morning – do not give up hope. God is in control. This slight oppression is but for a moment. It will pass, and God prepares us for the eternal blessing that He will give us

Then a list of things that we must do so as not to lose hope, follows:

- *Remain involved with the spiritual warfare against Satan*
- *Improve yourselves spiritually in terms of your life of prayer, relationship with God and your battle attire, and*
- *Attend church regularly.*

Is this really the (only) way in which the rapes, murders of police, violence, motor hijackings and robbery can be challenged? Is that all that the Gospel has to say about this? Must all of this be viewed so “internally and spiritually”? Is the contemporary South African situation really merely a “sign of the times” (light oppression), that, in a certain sense, must just be accepted – as long as you are spiritually prepared and ready for the second coming (eternal blessing)? I do not agree.

The legalistic internalizing of our South African problem is often accompanied by *a narrowing of the ethical dimensions of biblical texts*. Often preachers just miss the breathtaking possibilities that are included in the text. For example, when the sermon is on 1 John 3:18: *Dear children, our love must not be only words and lip service, but must be proven by deeds, and then*

in sincerity, then one could expect that the deed-character of our love would be the logical subject at issue. However, the preacher prefers to stick to the question of forgiveness. “*There is no deed that so perfectly proves love as the deed of genuine forgiveness.*” That forgiveness is important and biblical cannot be denied. But, is this what the text deals with primarily? Does the context not, in fact, address earthly possessions and our concretely serving each other with them? (Cf vv 11-17.) The preacher misses the ethical invitation of the text and rather urges the listeners to ask themselves: Have I enough forgiveness in my heart?

This missing of the biblical text’s possibilities is particularly clear in a meditation on the miracle of the multiplication of the bread (Mt 14:13-21). The preacher takes a phrase from the text (verse 18: “Bring them here to me...”) and thus changes the miracle of the bread into a law of individualistic conversion. Sentences such as the following, emphasize the moralistic approach: “*If you are prepared to give your life to Me unconditionally, then I (Jesus) am prepared to make something wonderful of you.*” The preacher does not understand much about this miracle of the bread being a sign of how God’s Kingdom also dawns in this world – with people that are fed só that they (truly) are no longer hungry. Neither does he understand the church’s calling to institute (such) signs of the Kingdom. He rather changes it into an individualistic recipe for success, with the rhetorical motto that echoes like a refrain through the sermon: “Bring them here to me” –

*God does not allow his true children to be mocked.
 Today God also wants to intervene in your need.
 Perhaps your finances are very poor.
 Perhaps your marriage is very unstable.
 Perhaps your business is going down the drain.
 Perhaps your relationships with your family are very weak.
 Bring them here to Me!*

As mentioned in 5.8, a basic Reformed point of departure, namely the appeal – not to a general religious spirituality – but to sanctify the whole of life and the earth, disintegrates in sermons such as these. It misses the scope of the Gospel as a *world-transforming Gospel*.

As previously stated, most moralistic sermons miss the natural life and world of the listeners, and thus also the main ingredient of their everyday reality. This reality is only “entered” in one way, namely by a narrowed “extraordinary” imperative: be a missionary. In a cliché-like way listeners are repeatedly admonished to go and witness – mostly also understood verbally: “*where we move, in school, at university, in our work, in the street, in the home*”

“to go outside and to shout and rejoice as loud as you can: Jesus Christ lives.”

Such platitudes say everything ... and nothing. They hang the fodder so high up and so in general, that it becomes a law, a law that no person can obey, and that gives him/her a faith depression every Sunday. That the believer is called to live in the reality and everyday life of his/her profane and human existence is seldom focused upon in a concrete way. The homiletical movement to the inner being of the human psyche (which I have already discussed) attains revenge in that the true reality factually remains outside the scope in most sermons. Even the most basic events highlighted by the public media, are conspicuous in their absence! Instead thereof listeners are repeatedly again, and repeatedly without success, called to a kind of missionary activity that not only neglects the mundane, but is also understood exclusively within the parameters of a “church religious service”. Something like a variety of gifts, and thus also a variety of callings is not principally considered. Listeners are simply overburdened – perhaps because the minister wants to shape them to his own image – an image created from his own religious ghetto existence? But, we are not all called to be small (or great!) ministers, are not all claimed to become clones of the pulpit. The fundamental fault with such sermons is, inter alia, their appeal to a type of witness versus the mundane, while the everyday is profoundly despised, or, in any case, is looked upon as so sinful and unchangeable, that the fact that God indeed here “becomes beautiful” (Bohren) is regarded principally with suspicion. As a result of a distorted commandment-preaching, a healthy creation ethic is ousted by a unilateral redemption ethic, which offers recipes that are contrary to the reality. However, the true redemption of the cross takes us on the way of the cross into reality, where recipes do not work. This implies a clash with reality for the sake of reality, a clash that can repeatedly adopt other forms, and in which God repeatedly can reveal the promise of the Gospel in a new way.

5.9.4.2 False contradictions

Another rhetorical technique that deserves special mention in this regard, and perhaps best illustrates the breaking apart of the reality before God by the proclamation of a spiritualized Gospel, is the use of false contradictions.

When a preacher declares: *“Each soul must be regarded as a potential inhabitant of heaven,”* then it is rather Plato than the Gospel who is speaking. After all, the Gospel turns us into people, true humans, not souls or angels! Such contradictions alienate people from the reality, so that it is no wonder that many start to think that the Gospel is either not feasible or is intended for another planet or time.

It is also cruel. As in the following sentences:

A child of the Lord walks around with a smile on his face, a child of the Lord must rejoice because he has received the greatest gift of all gifts There must always be a song on a child of the Lord's face, always a smile, because we have been liberated, we are ransomed people from the sins of this world. Therefore, we cannot but rejoice, be merry. We must sing.

Is the last *must* an indicative or an imperative? Alas, an imperative that only sets an inhuman standard for the congregation, but misses a large portion of the biblical testimony regarding the nature of faith – just think about the lamentation psalms! David could hardly *always* smile, or Paul, or we. Such a demand is unreal – also biblically – and therefore not feasible.

Sermon example 3

CAN THE CHURCH KNEEL?

(John 13:1-17)

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” (Jh. 13:6)

Once a Roman-Catholic priest named Pausch attended a worship service that he will remember until the day he dies. It was Holy Communion and there was a group of young boys in the church who came from the abbey adjacent to the church. That Sunday, there was, as usual in the Roman-Catholic church, a foot-washing ceremony in preparation for partaking of Holy Communion. Priest Pausch, the liturgist, invited the boys to sit on the steps of the liturgical space and he, with a small basin of water in the one hand and towel in the other, started at the one end to wash the boys' feet. When he reached the last little boy, he noticed with surprise that he still had his socks on. Before priest Pausch could say anything, the little boy whispered urgently: *“Father, my socks are also dirty. You must please also wash them!”*

Priest Pausch decided that this was not the time to differ from the boy on this and, because he was not the type to be intimidated by dirty socks, he washed, as well as he could, the boy's socks together with his feet in the little basin of water. When he had finished, the boys took their seats – all except the boy with the wet socks. He slipped out of the back door leaving a trail of wet footprints through the church.

Priest Pausch looked for him after the service and found him in his room where he lay curled up on his bed, wet socks and all, sobbing uncontrollably. The priest pulled off his socks, dried his feet and asked the boy what the matter was. While sobbing he replied: *“Father, I was always scared of the water of the foot-washing, because I am scared of the grace of God, yes of God Himself. I never wanted to allow Him too close to my body, or allow Him to crawl under my skin. I thought my socks would keep the water and the Lord away, out – and then it did not happen. When you washed my feet, the water touched me, and to me it was so revealing, so unmasking, but yet so gladdening, so liberating. I am crying, yes, but I am crying with joy. Because, do you know, when I saw you bending and washing my feet, I saw with enlightened spiritual eyes the Lord Jesus Himself bending and washing my feet. I, undeserving sinner – Jesus washed my feet! Thank God, my thinly woven resistance did not deter Him.”*

Look, whether it now is a Roman-Catholic lad or a stalwart Reformed church father, we all have this tendency, this built-in mechanism that wants

to keep the Lord away from our bodies. We turn God away. We send up smokescreens, build walls, put on socks In fact, this is what the value system of the world dictates: remain in control, regulate and rule. Keep your grip on things. Don't allow anybody to come too close to you. In this world there is no room for the delicate and exposed, for breakable and broken people. You don't need anybody. You are an island. Independent. Strong. Not a weak dependant, but an unbreakable rock. You do not allow just anybody to wash your feet – even less think of the possibility of washing the feet of others!

We are not the first with these thoughts. Peter's question and statement is typically human: "*Lord, are you going to wash my feet? ... No ... you shall never wash my feet*" (vv 6,8). Peter's comment seems to be in order. It probably speaks of great respect. It is not that Peter found fault with the concept of foot-washing. After all, it was the common practice. People travelled on dusty roads with open sandals, stepped over doorsteps with dusty feet. Any good host would make arrangements for a foot-washing. But a slave had to do it, a *heathen* slave, the lowest class conceivable.

But Jesus? Was it not He who travelled through the country and revealed his omnipotence over devils, illness and death? Crowds streamed to listen to his teachings. A single word from Him and stormy waters became calm, the paralysed walked, the blind could see, the dead arose. He would ride into Jerusalem while the children called out before Him: "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the King of Israel!*" (cf Mt 21:9; Jh 12:13).

"*Lord, are you going to wash my feet?*" Peter's question reveals a basic misunderstanding that we all have in regard to the Lord and his church. We believe that glory and servitude are contrary to each other, kingship and slavery exclude each other. In fact, we argue thus: the more one serves, the less glorious one will be, the more servanthood, the less kingship! We do not understand Jesus' strange glory. It is a humble glory and a glorious humility. We do not understand this maxim of the Gospel: "... *the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mk 10:45).

Like a golden thread this wonderful paradox runs through the New Testament, and especially also through John 13. Jesus is addressed as *Lord* or *Teacher* or *Son of Man* no less than 11 times. The Greek word for Lord, *Kurios*, is a name of power, an expression of omnipotence. *Teacher* indicates somebody highly regarded in society. *The Son of Man* is a term of esteem from the Old Testament that indicates Jesus as the Messiah and his eternal sovereignty, his kingship over all nations. But, how do we find this Lord, this Teacher and Son of Man in John 13? As a kneeling figure of a servant, with a little basin of water and a small towel in his hand! The King in an apron!

A Bishop, named Martinus, one night had a dream. A gleaming figure appeared to him, so glorious that, even in his dream, Martinus could hardly dare to look at him. *"I am Christ,"* said the figure, *"I have come to reward you for your commitment."*

"But where are the marks on your hands and feet?" asked Martinus.

"I do not have marks," answered the figure, *"I am all glory."*

"Leave me, Satan," Martinus answered, *"the Christ whom I serve, is the Crucified."* And Satan – because it was Satan – left him.

The world offers many Christs to us. Woundless, unmarked, unbroken Christs. They cannot save us. Only one Lord can: the Crucified. There is only one Kurios who is a servant – the servant who is the Kurios. Only He can liberate us to truly serve our fellowmen. Because what is the church, is what you and I are: *people whose feet were washed, so that we also can wash the feet of others.* Herein lies the basic image of the church, yes the basic test for the church: *"Now that I, your Lord and your Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I set an example that you should do as I have done for you"* (vv 14,15).

The question, primarily, is not how impressive our organization or how functional our structures, or how finely formulated our confessions of faith, or how orthodox our theological theories are. The vital question is: *Can we kneel? Before God. But also before our fellowmen. Also those with dirty feet?*

This I believe: the test for the church in South Africa in the years to come, will be the question whether we can serve our fellowmen, literally at grassroots level, in following Christ our Lord as doers, servers – foot washers, or whether we are mere listeners to the Word, or even talkers!

Look carefully. Somebody is kneeling now at your feet. He wears the crown of a Kurios on his head. He also has the little basin of a servant in his hand.

Oh, if, at least, we just depart from Him with wet socks

(Adapted and translated from Cilliers 1996.)

The living voice of the gospel: When the preacher speaks



This chapter examines the role of the preacher in preparing a sermon, in the light of:

- His/her personality and spirituality
- The challenge to preach creatively and imaginatively, and
- Examples of the failed (moralistic) functioning of preachers in sermons.



6.1 The secret of preaching: Becoming of age

“The Gospel must not be written, but proclaimed The church is not a pen-house, but a mouth-house.” By this declaration Luther emphasized the fact that preaching has a particular oral immediacy and urgency; that it is a person (Person!)-to-person event at a destined time and place (cf Meuser 1969:19,30). God’s Word, primarily, is a spoken Word, a deed-event, is indeed *dabar*. Preaching that does not understand and take this into consideration, implicates the essence of the Word.

Imagine this: after a week’s wrestling with a text, a preacher is ready to preach, but falls ill just before the service. He/she could allow the written sermon to circulate so that each member of the congregation could read it in silence, or a substitute could act on behalf of the preacher. After all, such a simulated performance, although a voice-in-absence, is not unusual at some political or other meetings. This could have significance for some, but in a worship service this cannot replace the genuine article. The absence of the voice, thus the person of the preacher, harms the essence of the preaching as a personal, and thus *human expression and articulation* of the Voice of God.

Naturally, the preacher could send a tape of his/her voice, or a video recording, or, preferably, could communicate with the congregation per telephone or satellite television. In future, preachers possibly would be able to be “present” by means of a three-dimensional hologram. This would be fine, yet something would be lacking, that which belongs to the essence of preaching would be lacking, namely personal and dynamic visual contact, the living communication when the preacher and congregation meet at a specific time and place in God’s presence in the worship service. Indeed: *the Gospel must be proclaimed in the sermon by means of a human mouth* (cf Wilson 1995:47).

6.2 The small I in service of the great I

The preacher’s voice is an important voice heard from the pulpit – and by this I mean not only his/her physical voice, rather his/her entire humanness, rather the *presence of the preacher as a person*. This empirical reality may never be disregarded: those who occupy the pulpit are people of flesh and blood, who have a unique history, a unique story and who experience their personal wrestling with God. In fact, if one tries to be any other than oneself on the pulpit, this will turn your preaching into something other than what was intended. On the pulpit are not, primarily, rhetorical giants or humble messengers, or fascinating storytellers, but people such as they

truly are – *coram deo*, before God. Perhaps there are too many clones on the pulpit, rather than original creations. Perhaps there are too many adopted mannerisms that cannot turn a person into a preacher. With apology to all preachers: every bird must sing its inborn song. If you wish to sing in any other way, you will be false – in more than one meaning of the word.

In this, there is always a kind of tension: in preaching, the preacher is never in the forefront, may never be the protagonist in the drama of the preaching event, but rather is one who, together with the congregation, listens to what God says – *Als hoorder onder die hoorders*, the title of Dingemans's book (*As hearer amongst the hearers*, 1991). Yet, it is *you* who stands before the congregation, with your knowledge of the congregation, your theological insights, your own personality, limitations and potential – not merely a tape recorder that allows your mechanical voice to reach the congregation's ears. The preaching, the preacher's humanness literally embodies the truth: "*Authentic preachers are those who embody the Gospel they proclaim in their manner of delivery*" (Ward 1992:129). One also recalls the familiar declaration by Philips Brooks (1964:5): "*Preaching is communicating divine truth through human personality.*"

This tension can also be described in another way: humility *and* authority characterize a preacher. For preachers, a great temptation, on the one hand, is to totally overestimate their role in the preaching event, and to become something of homiletical exhibitionists. All who have preached know the temptation of being popular. Luther also wrestled with this and concluded:

If you think that you are learned and that you have reached the ultimate, and you feel proud of your little books, teachings and writings, as though you have done wonderfully and have preached wonderfully, and if you are extremely satisfied because people praise you in the presence of others or, if not praised, you feel disappointed and ready to give up hope – if this is your frame of thought, my friend, just grab yourself by the ears, and if you succeed in grabbing them, you will grab long, rough donkey's ears. Or, take a little more trouble and adorn yourself with golden bells so that people can hear you wherever you go, with admiration can point at you with their fingers while calling out: "Please look – there is that wonderful man who can write such excellent books and deliver such significant sermons!" Then you will miss the Lord's blessings. Because God resists the haughty, but gives his grace to the humble (cf Meuser 1983:65).

Preaching deals with, inter alia, the great I ... and the small I. Each sermon depends on the great I of God, because his *I am what I am* (Ex 3:14)

leads to *I am the bread of life* (Jh 6:35); *I am the light of the world* (Jh 8:12); *I am the good Shepherd* (Jh 10:14); *I am the true vine* (Jh 15:1), etcetera. It all depends on this I of God repeatedly being articulated and becoming visible in each sermon. Each sermon becomes part of the history and the future of the great I – or else it is no sermon. The small I of the preacher is in service of the great I. The small I on the pulpit, myself, am a kind of sermon, a message, whether I am aware of it or not.

However, the reality is that the small I often does not cooperate with the great I, but is a competitor; that the small I casts a long shadow over the great I and obscures Him in the sermon. Often, the small I – consciously or unconsciously – proclaims his/her relationship with the great I already in the sermon's first sentence. Often the theology, or lack thereof, is concentrated also already in the first sentence of the sermon. Often the bell of the Gospel is already rung or silenced there, and the preacher becomes the embodiment of the Gospel or a law that has a moralistic influence on the listeners. Instead of the small I becoming less and the great I more, the opposite takes place (cf Jh 3:30; also Bohren 1988:98-107).

Like all believers, preachers also need daily, continuous conversion – away from their own vanity. They must know: my “success” is not necessarily equivalent to the Gospel. In fact, the danger is great that preachers, as a result of their office, theological knowledge, or success in ministry, can become satisfied with the substitute for true conversion, that they become so “accustomed” to divine things, that they become blunted and start to associate clinically with them. You can start to rationalize (your) sin instead of attaining a good self-knowledge. You can misunderstand the fine balance between self-denial and self-acknowledgement, and thus become unacceptable while preaching (cf 1 Cor 9:27).

On the contrary, to be a preacher is to be *maturely humble*, i.e. to become *theologically of age*. This coming-of-age, like conversion, is a continuous process, an enhancement of one's theological power of discretion, and thus wisdom. Therefore, preachers never “complete” their theological training. It, rather, is a way of life, a daily growth in wisdom. One of the most important questions that, in fact, could be asked of a minister is: Are you wise? And, concomitant therewith: Are you truly a *theologian*? If preachers say – as they often do – “I'm not really a theologian,” then they probably do not understand what the word *theologian* means and, for preaching, it probably would have been better if they had never mounted the pulpit. Wisdom and theology have nothing to do with pride or “success,” in the usual meaning of the word, but with being of age, and therefore with humility.

However, humility does not mean underestimating your role in preaching. When the Spirit works, He does not disregard us, but includes us. He

works in a *theonomic reciprocal* way, retains the initiative, but repeatedly accepts us in service of the proclamation of the Gospel. What to us is impossible, He makes possible; what we think cannot be done, He changes to be feasible (Bohren 1971:76-77; cf further 6.6).

Thus, our human contribution in preaching attains a particular value, a specific authority. Our concept of authority has probably been contaminated by caricatures thereof. A preacher's authority does not reside in autocracy, especially not spiritual or clerical autocracy, or in bureaucracy. Our authority resides in brokenness, our empowerment in being disempowered. Fundamental to all our attempts to be mediators between the text and the context, is a *hermeneutics of the cross*. Those who do not understand this hermeneutics, those who do not know that you are strong when you are weak (2 Cor 12:10), do not yet understand the heartbeat of preaching. After all, our authority lies therein that we cannot, but because God works in us, we can. This is contained in the message that we proclaim: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf Paul's declarations in 1 Cor 1:18-2:16). But, miraculously: it is we who proclaim it! Truly, one cannot but *dialectically confess*: it is the Gospel of Christ that is proclaimed in the world through his Spirit, but it is also we who open our mouths to preach on this (cf Ac 1:8)!

You are on the pulpit – *you* with your gifts, your calling, your unique articulation of the Gospel – and for this you need not apologize. One involuntarily recalls the epic story of Bart Nel, who, after an extremely sad history in which he lost virtually all that he loved, calls out ultimately, as a kind of climax: “*I have been Bart Nel since then, and I am still he*” (Van Melle 1968:180). Indeed, it is a type of liberation to be allowed to be *yourself*, especially also on the pulpit. Preachers need to discover and rediscover this freedom repeatedly – for the sake of proclaiming the *Gospel*.

6.3 The preacher's relational integrity

Preaching is never an uninvolved transfer of knowledge, but a word that derives from one's association with God, from your encounter with God in the text (Iwand 1964:19). You may not hide from the congregation in any way, not behind your correct exegesis, nor your quick solutions, nor your awesome profundity.

Your role and your mask may not, in any way, come between you and the congregation, or between you and the text and the God of the text. In no way may you live merely according to expectations, the image that others have of you, and disguise *yourself* accordingly. In due course, the truth, after all, has a way of being revealed despite all disguises.

The fact is: when incongruence has arisen between your personal and your public *persona*, then the writing is on the wall for your preaching. In preaching your own heart is at issue; your own life is at stake. Preachers must be at home in the house of their own preaching. If you are merely a tenant, this is very soon obvious (Thielicke 1965:14). No, we may never become homiletical house tenants, but rather residents of tents, like Christ who erected his tent among us (Jh 1:15)!

A sermon is not merely something learned that you can convey to others, but something that *you* yourself wish to say, because you cannot but witness it – as the title of another well-known homiletical book emphasizes: *The witness of preaching* (Long 1989). We have been called to be faithful witnesses, people who, ourselves, are an example of one who was (first) addressed, touched, wounded, broken, consoled by the text, yes, by the God of the text. We are travellers in the desert who find shelter in the tent of the text, yes, of Christ – and, in preaching, beckon to others to join us in the refreshing shade.

If you do not know the rooms and passages, the corners and turns of the house of the text, or the flaps and pegs of the tent! – if you have not yet walked through or around it and have not become familiar with it, you cannot invite others and expect them to believe your words about it. If you, for example, do not wrestle with God in the depths of Psalm 130, you must not hastily mount the pulpit with a message on it; if you have not experienced the surge of praises in all the fibres of your being, then you must be wary of articulating Psalm 150 on your (preaching) lips.

To say the above from another angle: all preachers are in certain relationships that are indeed decisive for themselves as *preachers*, for example, their relationship with God (including their awareness of being called), their relationship with themselves (involving elements such as their personalities, psychic histories, psychic health, etc.) and also their relationships with other people, particularly those to whom they want to preach. *Those who do not have integrity in their relationships, may indeed be able to speak like angels, but will hardly attain entrance to people's hearts.* For example, if you do not love people, then you have no right to preach to them (cf Jabusch 1981:51-63).

Often, in this connection, one hears of the *preacher's spirituality*. This, indeed, is of great importance to preaching. Although I would hesitate to say that all depends on this in preaching, or that my person or spirituality as a preacher makes a decisive difference, we must not underestimate their influence. Under "spirituality" I understand: *The total life of the minister, with all such a person's relationships, under the point of view of his/her calling to walk with God through the Spirit* (Gal 5:16,25).

The question about the preacher's spirituality – I prefer the expression:

life before God – is not only of theological importance, but also relevant from communication-scientific considerations. You cannot touch fellow humans if you, yourself, are not (co-)human; you cannot speak about God with passion and integrity if you do not have passion and integrity. The preacher's unique voice introduces humanity into the whole process of preparing a sermon, opens possibilities for association and identification. Or, stated theologically: the preacher's humanity gives hands and feet to the charisma that the Spirit of Christ pours out into the preacher's life. Preachers are not mere sterile, bloodless "channels" through which the Gospel comes to us: the Gospel comes to us in human mouths and human words – otherwise it would not reach our human ears and human hearts. Thomas Troeger (1999:85-95) speaks of "*the landscapes of the heart*" that must be expanded in preaching, i.e. the unique (psychological, sociological, economic, etc.) interpretative frameworks within which we all live. To preach is to find contact points with specific stories, symbols, values and rituals that give meaning to people's lives, to traverse these landscapes of the heart and to introduce the Gospel there in an imaginative way. This would hardly be possible, says Troeger, if you, yourself, have not explored your own heart.

Currently, there is a renewed interest in the role of the preacher's person (cf the recent local study of Malan Nel, 2001). That this emphasis is not without snags is equally true. The theological integration of voices in preaching (of the preacher, text, congregation and God) can easily fall apart here. You can acquire the impression that all depends on your personality, or the measure of your spirituality. This could become a new form of moralism. Yet, it does not detract from the fact that this is a neglected aspect in the (especially distorted Reformed) homiletics that demands attention.

6.4 Without praying, you cannot preach

If you wish to talk about the preacher's life before God (spirituality), then you could follow various routes. I refer to but one dimension that, in my opinion, is fundamental: *prayer*. It is a pity that prayer so often is viewed as something apart from theology. In fact, for many, the worlds of theology and that of prayer are principally – at least in practice – two totally divergent worlds. In my opinion, this is a fatal separation. We must rather say: theology primarily is prayer, and prayer primarily is theology (cf Saliers 1994:15). Similarly, preaching primarily is prayer; in no way can it be separated from, or even thought apart from it.

It is significant how few homiletical books take prayer as their principal

point of departure. But, is this possible? After all, spirituality is something that emerges from your personal, continuous discourse with God, from your own existence in prayer. Prayer labels your spirituality, which again influences your preaching. *Prayer modulates your preaching voice.*

Without prayer, sermons cannot be “made.” Bethel Müller (1961:334) writes poignantly on this:

A sermon is a wrestling in which the preacher feels small and poor – so small and poor as in no other wrestling. This wrestling brings moments in which he flees from the desk to the kneeling bench, there to continue his activities on the sermon – and to pray and plead that the Lord must help and further lead him under the compulsion of his Word. During prayer his over-hasty and unfriendly thoughts fall away; in prayer he is liberated from his “beautiful” phraseology; in prayer the sermon attains depth because there God whispers his thoughts in his ear. Then living proclamation of the Word is born in prayer and heard on the pulpit.

In prayer, the *person of the preacher*, inter alia, comes at issue as seldom else. All human experiences are involved that still demand clarification: the resistance that you experience with the biblical text, the obstructions between yourself and the congregation, your philosophical questions and – joys. Eugene Peterson (1992:111) writes: “*Prayer is the most deeply human action in which we can engage. Behavior we have in common with the animals. Thinking we have in common with the angels. But prayer – the attentiveness and responsiveness of the human being before God – this is human.*” In prayer, the questions of our human existence are raised to God, in the hope of receiving the light to share with the congregation.

In a way, we could say that prayer is the secret of preaching. However, this is a comment that could be misunderstood. You could argue: if I just pray, then all will be well in preaching. You can change prayer into an alibi for exegetical laziness or homiletical slovenliness. You could get the wrong impression that a moralistic keeping of “quiet time” – contrary to a pre-disposition of prayer – offers a watertight guarantee for successful preaching. You could try to incorporate prayer as a do-it-yourself technique to prepare or perk up a sermon. But this is not prayer. Prayer remains a gift of God which He repeatedly must give us só, must pour it out in us through his Spirit só, that we can *pray anew through Christ’s mouth* (Calvin; cf also Barth 1969:16-21).

To be a Christian, and to pray, is synonymous (Luther). To be a preacher and to pray is also synonymous. Prayer remains the fundamental form, the profound structure of all preaching (Bohren 1971:104-105). Augustine provides the well-known maxim – which preachers could put up on their

pulpits and desks as a maxim for life: *sit orator antequam dictor* (first pray, then speak). In this regard, he also says the following:

When the moment to speak arrives, let him (the preacher), before speaking, raise his parched soul to God, so that he can share what he himself has drunk, he can pour out what he himself has absorbed And who can do what we said is proper and how it is proper, but only He in whose hand we and also our sermons are? (cf Van Oort 1989:18; also 1991:26).

For Augustine, preaching remains a gift of the Spirit, a good word, a good sermon (*sermo bonus*) that the Spirit Himself must put into the preacher's mouth – inter alia, also as answer to prayer, no, as articulation of the prayer. Sermons not only need prayer but, in a certain sense, they are prayer. Sermons are the search to find; the knock to which God must open – God who gives bread, not a stone (cf Mt 7:7-11). In short: those who cannot pray, cannot preach. Not truly.

In the library of the Candler Theological Seminary (Emory University, Atlanta), there is an interesting piece of furniture. A metal disc explains its secret: “*Prayer desk or pulpit made for John Wesley about 1740, used by him in preaching to the miners of Wales.*” It has a place where Wesley could stand and preach, but also a railing where he could kneel in prayer. Our pulpits should look like that. Our pulpits must also be prayer stools (cf Bugg 1992:16).

6.5 The preacher's virtuous existence

In a sense, it is more important who we are, than what we say. A philosophical idiom reads: *agere sequitur esse* – one's actions flow forth from one's being; what you do (and say) flow from what you are. Aristotle already believed – contra to that of his time – that a speaker's ethos is more important than the mere mastering of rhetorical techniques. Ethos, focusing on communication, is more important than *logos* and even *pathos*! It is also significant that Paul, when writing to Timothy to remind him of his preaching task, he precedes this with a reference to virtuous existence: “... *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. I give you this charge: Preach the Word* (2 Tim 3:17-4:1-2). Virtue, integrity, sincerity apparently forms the bed in which, for preaching, the capacity for true communication is born. If you cannot deal with small everyday things with integrity, you must not think that you will be able to deal with the greater things of the Kingdom with integrity. If you cannot communicate the small gestures of integrity long before you execute all your preaching gestures on

the pulpit, it is best not to preach. Stanley Hauerwas (1985:188) writes:

The way we learn a story, after all, is not just by hearing it. Important and significant stories must be acted out. We must be taught the gestures that help position our bodies and our souls to be able to rightly hear and then retell the story ... the way we learn the story is by learning such gestures as simple as how to kneel.

Indeed: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi, lex praedicandi*. As you pray, so you confess, so you live, so you preach.

We must first be made preachers, before we could even think of trying to “make” sermons. Luther wrote stirringly about this. According to him there are three things that make a preacher, three basic elements in the educational process of the preacher *as preacher*, namely prayer, meditation and tribulation (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*). Unfortunately space does not allow an extensive discussion of each. One could, indeed, design a whole homiletic around this! A single citation regarding each may well serve to stimulate your appetite.

- *Prayer: For this reason you must lose hope about your own wisdom and reason, because with these you will attain nothing Kneel in your inner room and ask God in true humility and gravity to give you true wisdom ... I consider my prayer to be more than the devil himself. If this were not so, Luther would have done differently long before this. Yet, people do not want to understand and acknowledge the great wonders or miracles that God does for the sake of my work. If I but neglect to pray on a single day, then I would lose a great deal of the fire of faith.*
- *Meditation: Secondly, you must meditate, not only in your heart, but externally, on the oral word and the expressed words that are written in the Book. This you must always consider and reconsider and read over and over again with committed attention and contemplation to discover what the Spirit means. And take care that you do not become tired thereof and think that you have read it enough when you have read, heard and repeated once or twice and fully understood it. In such a way, no great theologian emerges, because they, who do not persevere with meditation on the Word, are like half-ripe fruit that falls to the ground.*
- *Temptation: This is the true touchstone that teaches you not only to know and to understand, but also to experience how true, genuine, sweet, wonderful, powerful and consoling the Word of God is, thus it is the Wisdom above all wisdoms Because, as soon as the Word of God bears fruit through you, then Satan will harass you, so that you can become a true preacher and learn by temptation to seek and love the Word of God. Because I, myself – should I be*

allowed to air my humble opinion – must thank the papistry very much that they harassed me so and made me so tense, plagued me so with the devil's violence, that I became a reasonably good theologian, which, otherwise, would not have been the case (cf Meuser 1983:75).

All this implies that preaching is no hobby, nor is it a mere church activity that you can just perform “professionally.” It is a way of life, a training school. It goes through your marrow and blood. You do not merely preach. You are, or are not, a preacher.

Preaching is hidden ecstasy: behind it lies being gripped by God. Can one say it better than Miskotte (1971:257,259, translated from a sermon on 1 Cor 14:15,20)?

A sermon is cooled-off ecstasy, a congealed rapture, but if there were not glossolalia behind it, if there were not something or other behind it in the biography of the man who preaches, nor in the congregation where it takes place, if there were no evidence of this rapture, the certainty, then this is not what the Spirit intends.

Indeed, if you do not experience the rapture of the Gospel, then you will never become of age as preacher.

But, one could ask: How does it happen? How is this rapture and coming of age possible? The answer follows.

6.6 It is the Spirit together with us ...

A few years ago, there was a remarkable blind student, André Steyn, in the men's residence, Dagbreek, at the University of Stellenbosch. One evening there was a power failure in the whole of Stellenbosch. It was a particularly dark night, without even a glimmer of moonlight. The patio of Dagbreek was pitch-dark; one couldn't see a hand before one's eyes.

A few students were attending a function and arrived simultaneously at the main entrance of Dagbreek. Ahead of them was the dark patio. One of them, the head student, Piet Vorster, then had the bright idea of asking André to lead him to his room. After all, André knew the patio like the palm of his hand and knew how many paces one had to walk before you turned left or right, how many steps there were, where the places were where one could easily stumble.

That evening an extraordinary scene was enacted. André, the blind student, who could “see” in the dark, led his friend, the sighted who was “blind” in the dark, to his destination – needless to say, safely.

Preachers must be such people – people who can see further and deeper in the dark – also in the current countless “power failures” – and must be able to help others to “see,” so that they too can reach their destination. For this, we need enlightened spiritual eyes, which only the Spirit can give us (Eph 1:18).

Now, the question is: How does this relationship between the Spirit and the preacher “work”? What are its characteristics and consequences? Could it possibly be “guaranteed”?

Especially in his so-called “first phase”, Karl Barth (1924:103) would have answered with an emphatic no! to the last question. For him, the most important question that one could ask in preaching is not so much: How does one prepare a sermon, but rather: How could one (dare to) preach? For this reason, we must not concentrate, primarily, on the methodology, but on the wonder of preaching, and the prayer to the Spirit: *veni, creator spiritus* (come Creator-Spirit) ... (KD IV/3:579 ff).

The only “system,” that Barth (1924:13) would accept, was the infinite, qualitative distinction between God and humans (with reference to Kierkegaard), with all its negative and positive implications. God must speak, straight from above, and no method can mediate this speaking. Only when, by means of the working of the Spirit, the Word strikes one like lightning strikes a tree can one pay homage to God. All other things emerge from humans and are in vain

It appears as though Barth regards the work of the Spirit and that of the preacher as two basic antipoles or, at least, as two poles that are brought together involuntarily only occasionally. The Spirit comes and goes as He pleases, speaks where and when He wishes (cf Bohren’s critical comments, 1963:111 ff).

On the contrary, Rudolf Bohren (1971:77) asks Barth: Why can there not be any methodology when God speaks and the Spirit works? Bohren does not want to regard the work of the Spirit and methodology as antipoles, but only as various aspects of the reciprocal relationship between God and humans. In this regard, Rudolf Bohren (1974:74 ff) leans strongly towards a concept that Arnold van Ruler coined for the first time in the context of his “relative independent pneumatology,” namely: *theonomic reciprocity*. By this concept, both wish to express, on the one hand, the fact that the relationship between God and humans is a relationship that originated and is being maintained on the basis of God’s initiative (=theonomic), and, on the other hand that human action is a real component of this relationship, thus with specific value. Therefore, homiletically speaking, Bohren can thus emphasize the importance of methodology, as the Spirit and methodology need not be in opposition. However, all through this reciprocity, God retains the honour, his action makes everything possible

– God created us as we now are: in Christ Jesus, He created us to devote our lives to good deeds for which he destined us (Eph 2:10). This theonomic reciprocity must not be conceived as a kind of identification of God and humans, so that one eventually cannot distinguish who does what, or as a theory in which people complement God's work, i.e. bring it to fulfilment, but as a way in which the biblical view of God's grace and human gratitude therefore is expressed.

This means that God initiates and maintains the relationship between God and humans, but also that it is a genuine relationship, in which the human share is an indispensable element. This relationship is not brought about in an involuntary way, but through the lasting working of the indwelling Spirit in us. Therefore, it remains a miracle that can still be expressed in prayer, but the "human and the feasible" also attains a special value (Bohren 1971:78).

Although we can never grasp or control the Spirit, He yet came to stay! And, Bohren emphasizes, He remains *só* with us that we can begin to "cooperate" creatively, also in the process of preparing a sermon.

On the one hand He gives us freedom for the methodology, creates a space for all that is good to be involved: science, art, technique, poetry, etcetera – a series of wonderful "aids" for proclamation. Especially since Pentecost, preaching attains a multivoiced, multicoloured character, in accordance with the Spirit's actions not only in the creation, history and culture, but especially also in the church. The Spirit cooperates *só* with us that his work is no longer limited to "lightning moments," but rather adopts the character of a lasting indwelling (cf Cilliers 1994:251-255).

On the other hand, this freedom implies creativity in the methodology. Everything can be tested. Preaching is a playful act in which preachers can employ words, possibilities, angles of approach, in which they must be receptive for inspiration and metaphors to be able to say as well as possible: "The Kingdom of heaven is like ...!"

6.7 The Spirit makes us creative ... but how?

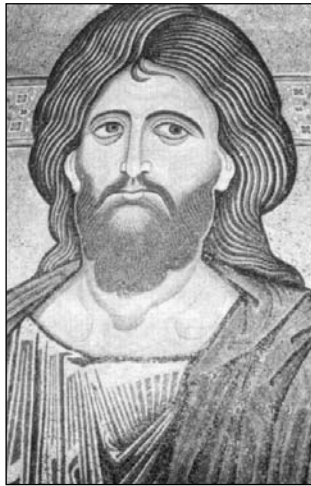
The Spirit makes us creative and, in the process, includes what is truly human and feasible. Now, the question is: What is creativity? How does it "work"? For example, can we implement the findings of the psychology of creativity? Are the psychology of creativity and the theology of creativity necessarily in opposition?

In the light of what we have said thus far: definitely not! After all, if one thinks of the Spirit, one also thinks about humans! Those who think about the Spirit *must* simply also focus on the entire human being, with the full

package of his/her personality. However, we shall indeed have to place the points of departure and findings of these and other sciences repeatedly under “control” of the creative biblical text, the creative congregation and especially the creative Spirit. But the benefits are never-ending!

6.7.1 A BIRD’S-EYE VIEW OF THE HISTORY OF CREATIVITY

Richard Kearny describes the historical development of creativity with the aid of the classical three-division of premodernism, modernism and post-modernism, and presents a number of typical works of art from this era, art-historical examples that are characteristic of these eras and portray strikingly the principal points of departure. The works of art are, as it were, *aesthetic insights into the imaginative worlds* of these periods. To limit this theme, I shall concentrate especially on the characteristic images of the *human face* – in the hope that we shall recognize also something of the “face” of the relative periods.¹⁸



Christ Pantocrator
(11th century AD)

The first painting represents the premodern phase and is titled *Christ Pantocrator*. Immediately, it is noticeable that the artist did not sign it – characteristic of many icons from this time. This already indicates that this

18 Thomas (1979:153) comments significantly that the portrayal of Christ’s face in art over the centuries was also an attempt to portray ourselves: “*In looking on the face of Christ, the work of our hands and minds, we are looking at ourselves, both as we are and as we would like to be.*”

is not (may not be) about individual creativity or originality – at most, the work of art could be ascribed to one of the great Byzantium schools or, in general, to the iconography of the Middle Ages. The emphasis is not on the process of art, but on the truth that it should mediate. Its underlying message: this work has sacramental character; it points to a greater Reality, namely the Son of God, and most profoundly, to God Himself. *Thus, it is rather about the Mystery behind the image, than the image itself.*

Therefore, it is comprehensible that such strict rules and formulae existed according to which the artists of that time had to work, standard procedures in the application of paint and a clerically prescribed and strictly limited palette – to eliminate all involvement of the artist *as artist* in mediating the Creator Himself.

The expressionless eyes of the icons are remarkable: they invite the viewer to look into them and to see glimpses of eternity in their calm pools. The eyes function as portals to God's supersensory transcendence, rather than allow the viewer to see only the human facial expressions and sensations. The icons have a kind of *theocentric quality*, causing a desire in the viewer to worship God *by means of* the image (Kearny 1988:9). In these images, the game of the imagination is thus obstructed and stereotyped from the outset; the church hampers institutionally any expressivity, realism or trueness to life.



*Vincent van Gogh:
Self Portrait
(ca 1888)*

Self-portraits, typical of the modern era, are entirely different. A good example is that of Vincent van Gogh, in which the emphasis is on the image as a medium of *human* expression. Here, theocentrism is replaced by *anthropocentrism*, by aesthetic subjectivity. The basic humanistic effect is

already evident – contrary to premodern art – in the originality of colour and strong brushwork. Here a *person* is busy creating, who is not reticent to express his existence on canvas – even if it is just his painful existence. The sacramental prayer has become an existential cry. The calm, bottomless eyes of the iconic Christ have changed into eyes full of pain and anxiety, even insanity. Here there no longer is an attempt to *reproduce* an eternal reality, but to *produce* the (evasive) reality – even up to lunacy. Beneath Van Gogh’s misery there is the faith that an individual can get a grip on truth, or preferably: that the individual himself can portray this truth. From this shift in emphasis – which already had its run-up in the Italian Renaissance – it does not demand much imagination (!) to arrive at the humanistic positivism of full-blooded modernism. Behind this positivism, is the belief that humans are capable of immeasurably much, that we, for example, can allow the truth behind/under/in all other truths to crystallize out by means of science and rational thinking.



*Pablo Picasso:
Weeping women
(1937)*

Pablo Picasso’s facial images speak a different, postmodern language. In a series titled “Picasso’s weeping women,” in which his cubist approach, inter alia, is evident, there are various fragmented and subjective perspectives of women, rather than a single, rational perspective. Thus Picasso compels us to think anew about the limits of our knowledge. A male chauvinist would, for example, be bothered by such an image, as the autonomy

and objectivity of his stereotypical perception of women would be affected in its core. Because, who is this woman actually? Mother? Madonna? Harlot? Or, on the other hand: a (indoctrinated and stereotyped) woman could ask: But am I then more than one face? Are there other possibilities for my existence? Dimensions that I have not yet discovered? Só Picasso's non-representative, multiperspective painting compels us to consider anew the chasm that exists between what we observe and what is reality, and about the possibilities of what we could become. Paintings such as this demythologize the perception that our preconceived concepts necessarily are "objective duplicates" of what is real. It breaks stereotypical perspective formation down to the ground.

The aesthetic result of this deconstruction process is simultaneously sublime uncertainty as well as pleasure. The uncertainty emerges from the realization that we cannot (any longer) know objectively for sure. But then there is also the pleasure of liberation from a lifeless and boring conceptual jail. To experience freshness and newness – herein lies the joys of discovery. Here one breaks out of the collective, the prosaic, and risks are taken. Here the average is left behind and unknown waters are sailed into. Here one plays with perceptions, rather than catching and putting them in a cage or under a block. Here one dances around the truth, rather than grasping it with a grip of steel and shaping it to your desire (for an extensive discussion of Picasso's oeuvre, cf Linn 1996:97 ff).



Andy Warhol:
Marilyn Monroe
serigraphy (1987)

However, postmodern art could also adopt other, more cynical appearances, as portrayed in the work of Andy Warhol. A typical example is his *Marilyn Monroe serigraphy*. Here we see how the theocentric paradigm of

iconography and the anthropocentric paradigm of self-portrayal make room for an *eccentric paradigm of parody* (here, I-centric, à la Jacques Lacan meaning: the unconscious subject is I-centric, it does not function as a controlling origin of self-expression; cf Moyaert 1981:35-67). All the typical characteristics of postmodernism are evident in this work of art: it is eclectic and does not pretend to be original or to portray an “objective reality.” In fact, this form of post modern art does not produce originals, it merely reproduces what already exists or has existed. It stands totally sceptical towards any form of art that intends to claim (the portrayal of) the truth, and parodies it. The most profound incentive of this form of postmodern art is to tarnish the pretences of modernism, to pierce to the bone and to unmask as false the claims of a controlling author, narrative order and metaphysical profundity. It rejects the magical status of a humanistic imagination and proclaims the “end of art.” Art becomes anti-art; is no longer viewed as a leap into the future, but merely a repetition of data from the past, such as the boring reviewing of an old film, ad infinitum. Yes, art rings the death knell for creativity, imagination and “the original truth.” *Postmodernists dance while parodying on the grave of modern idealism.* You could perhaps call this dance a “game,” but it is a dance that mocks, a game that breaks down – to rock bottom.

According to these parodying grave dancers, all that remains is to portray the contemporary consumer mentality and commercialization of the spirit or, preferably: to reproduce it technologically. Individuals no longer initiate; the globalized system only reproduces. It is a world full of Coca-Cola tins and Hollywood Marilyn Monroes, a world without depth or originality; a world in which an entire inversion of fact and fiction has taken place. (As the proud mother said to her friend who was admiring her playing child: “*That’s nothing, wait until you see his photo!*”) In fact, this is a world in which a total subversion of fact and fiction has taken place: you no longer know what is what. Typical postmodern art of this nature takes pleasure in its own superficiality, its own pseudo-status, and its own representative artificiality. It heckles with concepts such as “depth,” “truth,” “objectivity,” and “normativity.” This is the irony of our times: as perceived thus far, while we are surrounded by *images* (film, television, computers), human *imagination* is threatened in its most profound core (cf Kearny 1988:1-3).

While the premodernistic paradigm was *mimetic* by nature (art is like a *mirror* that portrays the Godly image) and the modernistic paradigm, in its turn, was *productive* by nature (the artist, him-/herself, is like a *lamp* that creates the light), the postmodernistic paradigm is fully *parodic* by nature (it also reflects, but not like a mirror, rather like a *mirror-in-a-mirror*, a *labyrinth of never-ending reproductions* of prosaic, commercialized superfi-

cialities, like mimicry with neither beginning nor end). During the pre-modern phase, artists were viewed as *imitators of creation*, or duplicators of the Creator's "original" creative process. The modern period of the Renaissance, the Romantic and Existentialistic humanism replaces the theocentric paradigm of the mimetic artist with the anthropocentric paradigm of the *original inventor*. Postmodernism reverses all of this: the productive inventor now becomes an *eclectic*, someone who plays around with fragments of meaning that he/she did not create. The artist becomes a "player," roaming in an anonymous interplay of images that he/she can parody, simulate or reproduce.

6.7.2 WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS HISTORY?

Now, the question is: what must we learn from postmodernism – the era in which we now live? After all, we cannot and must not return to pre-modernism. Although the latter wants to convince us of the reality of the objective Reality (and thus of preaching *as pointing out God on the pulpit!*), it also tempts us to kind of blunt the originality of the preacher as an artist, to a suppression of all homiletical poetry (and thus *the obliteration of the human being on the pulpit!*). With modernism we cannot stop – it again brings the human into the picture, but too ambitiously, too uncontrolled, too dominantly. The emphasis of the human as the sovereign, autonomous source of all meaning has – in the name of heaven – done enough harm! And postmodernism? It liberates us for a while, but – here I speak from aesthetic considerations – it also drops us into a new slavery.

It liberates us for a while: we need Picasso's weeping women, as it reminds us of the limits of our feigned, totalitarian grasp of the truth, it helps us to overcome the modernistic terror of the 20th Century (Linn 1996: 100). We need this type of art (read: preaching), because, other than "beautiful" representative art that strengthens us in our illusion that everything is under control and that our conceptual order is completely intact, Picasso's sublime, non-representative art reminds us of enjoying the play with that which we cannot understand, the joy of associating with the Unknown, the Totally Different One. It reminds us of our childhood, of the unconcealed joy of imaginative play without censorship!

However, postmodernism also drops us into a new slavery. Even child's play and undiluted fantasy grow only within certain parameters. As already pointed out, certain forms of postmodernism, indeed, lead to the degeneration and ultimate death of creativity. With Picasso one still finds joy in the creative process, in fact, the whole process is directed thereto – to the joy of discovery. If you reach down to the bottom, you feel the bubbling of alternatives. With Warhol, the joy has departed through the back door. At

the bottom you find nothing or, at most, hempen humour and bitter cynicism. While criticism of modernism is justified and vital, the alternative that this specific form of postmodernism offers is too ghastly to contemplate.

Therefore, we must distinguish between certain forms of postmodernism. In my opinion, the type that Picasso represents indeed liberates us for the *play of preaching* (cf again 2.6). It teaches us to regard ourselves less seriously, and to discover and develop playfully the wealth that there is – that we have received.

6.8 WHAT IS THE CORE OF CREATIVITY?

Thus: How must we define creativity? What is its core? Indeed, there are a variety of philosophical, educational, neurological and other definitions thereof. Broadly speaking, one could say that it is the process through which innovating combinations or associations (some prefer the term bisociations) of existing elements takes place, with a practical application: “*To create consists of making new combinations of associative elements which are useful*” (according to Martindale, the neurologist).

Perhaps one could say: the more unusual or surprising the combinations and the greater the practical application thereof, the more creative the process that brought it about. I prefer the relatively simple definition of the well-known educationalist, De Bono: “*Creativity is breaking out of established patterns to look at things in a different way.*” In fact, everything depends on the manner of observation, of the perception. How one observes, determines how one creates – or does not create (cf again 3.7).

Furthermore, we could say: imagination (creativity) is something that *happens* to you – there is no recipe to guarantee it – although it is also something that you must and can *learn*.

6.8.1 CREATIVITY IS SOMETHING THAT “HAPPENS” TO YOU

As regards this “happening”: it is a neurological fact that concentrated attention is often the biggest stumbling block to finding a solution, that it, as it were, makes the brain’s synapses close like sluices. What is necessary is “unfocused attention” (Martindale), the relaxation and rest after difficult wrestling with a problem – relaxation and rest that often leads to a spark of insight for finding the answer.

This can strike you at the most unusual times and places, for example, in the shower, while you jog or work in the garden, etcetera. Sometimes the first few seconds after waking in the morning are the most creative of

the whole day! What happened? Your brain had time to digest the data, and make new connections and associations. In fact, some of the greatest inventions of all times came to the inventors in this way: under an apple tree, in a bath full of water, lying stretched out in a rippling cornfield

If there is one way not to be creative, then it is by trying too hard to be creative!

Good news for preachers is this: to preach, you must not only work hard at the text, but you must also be able to relax gently around the text! But also: to preach you need time, you cannot – neurologically and methodologically speaking – begin to prepare your sermon on a Saturday afternoon. You can never start preparing your sermon too early, and you can never continue with it for too long. Monday afternoon might already be too late, and Saturday evening might be too early to stop

6.8.2 CREATIVITY IS ALSO SOMETHING THAT YOU MUST “LEARN”

In chapter 3 we saw that it is of crucial importance for preachers to regard everything around them differently, to observe deeper and in finer detail like good artists, ultimately, to see the invisible God. In chapter 4 we examined the spectacles, namely Scripture, through which we must look if we wish to see this invisible God. At the beginning of this chapter we reminded each other that our eyes must be open before we can look through the spectacles to see the invisible God, and that the Spirit, and only the Spirit can open our eyes thus.

A new creativity underlies all of these three “visionary processes”, a creativity that we received as a gift from God, but at which we, as humans, must also work with everything at our disposal. There are creative people, or rather: people who are inherently more creative than others. That is a bonus – which, nevertheless, must be sanctified by the Spirit. However, the good news is also: even people who are (regard themselves as) “uncreative” can acquire creativity – which must also be sanctified by the Spirit. Creativity “happens,” but is also “learnt.” Both are gifts of the Spirit!

The purpose of the following comments – which is but one example from the psychology of creativity – is to assist with this “learning” of creativity in the visionary processes of preparing sermons. In any case, in a classical way, it articulates tried neurological truths, truths that influence us whether we are aware of them, or not.

6.8.2.1 The four phases of creativity

To preach is to create; is being creative. To be able to do this demands more than mere knowledge of the necessary exegetical methods and sens-

ing what the congregational needs are. On the basis of the antique text of the Bible, the preacher must say something new, something exciting, possibly something disturbing, in such a way that the congregation hears it as a fitting and relevant word for them and for their time.

For this, preachers need creativity and they must deliver a “product” that is comparative to any scientific or artistic design or creation. As previously stated, the general “rules” or rather, psychology of creativity, apply also to the preacher as a creative person.

To this effect, Manfred Josuttis agrees with the classical neurological distinction of the four phases of the creativity process (cf Martindale 1981:103; also Erika Landau 1969:66), which could be applied quite easily to the process of preparing sermons, namely groundwork (*preparation*), development (*incubation*), clarification (*illumination*) and formation (*verification*).

6.8.2.1.1 The first phase of the process of producing a sermon:

Preparation

During this phase, one collects as much information as possible, and as widely as possible, with the view to Sunday’s preaching event – almost like a sponge that soaks up everything. The text of the sermon must be identified as soon as possible, as well as all material that could contribute towards understanding and actualizing this text. All insights regarding the congregation, i.e. factors that, for them, might either be relevant or hampering, must be considered.

Here, preachers need a kind of sensitivity in their observation (cf 3.6), and a naivety when interpreting their observation, i.e. openness for impulses, without too readily censoring, categorizing, or stereotyping. Here, they must accept that ostensibly unimportant declarations in the text, or events in the congregation, possibly could play a decisive role in the ultimate structuring of the sermon.

Not only should they ask: What strikes me in this text? but also: What does not strike me?, and: Why not?

The urge to distinguish between what is important, and what is not, must be resisted. Stereotypes that want to capture prematurely the full extent of the text and the congregation’s declarations and questions, must be avoided deliberately, and the inexplicable, extraordinary or improbable should rather be noted. Thus, a broader base is created upon which, and from which, the actual creative process can develop. If one wants to race too rapidly over the preparation phase, this will inevitably curtail creativity. Those who already wish to write their sermons on a Monday will perhaps have to rewrite them on the Saturday!

6.8.2.1.2 The second phase of the process of producing a sermon: Development (incubation)

The transition between the preparation and developmental phases (as also the other phases) do not necessarily follow chronologically. The distinction between these two resides possibly in the fact that development (incubation) mostly takes part in the subconscious mind (where seven-eighths of our brain functions take place), or during the practice of “unfocused attention.” Toward a solution, preachers carry and digest in their subconscious minds the information that was gathered during the preparation phase. Even if preachers are not at all conscious of this, they are busy with the sermon – whether during house calls, a church council meeting or on the golf course. One of the crucial elements of the sermon production process is to sleep – for which certain ministers naturally need no extra encouragement! For those that He loves, the Lord gives it in their sleep (Ps 127:2)! Rudolf Bohren would say: take the text with you into the night, trust the text, it takes its course with us; trust the Spirit too – after all He is also Lord of our subconscious

Warning: a person can not only stretch out the preparatory phase too long, and become too overloaded and tense to be creative, but also the incubation phase, thus becoming too unloaded and relaxed. Those, who want to sleep all the time, will not, without further ado, deliver a brilliant sermon on Sunday.

Creativity psychologists point out that this phase, during which the gathered insights and variety of possibilities mill around in the subconscious mind, could be a very disturbing and frustrating time for the individual. Often, this is concomitant with a feeling of inferiority and a noticeably higher level of irritation. You continually consider another text for your sermon. Or grab a collection of sermons from which to extract a ready-made sermon. Or consider finding somebody else to preach, or asking the doctor to diagnose an illness. You even despair about your calling, and consider another profession. Don't lose hope: we do not create something new from a vacuum, but from chaos (MW Shelley). And, a person *must* contain chaos to be able to give birth to a dancing star (Nietzsche)! Every good sermon probably is a sermon over which there first was despair!

Then the time comes to go and play. This meaning not golf or something similar, although, as seen above, this holds definite homiletical value! Here, I prefer to think of creative play outside, but especially also within the community of believers, a play in which the many possibilities that are locked in a text, are shared, are questioned, and held against the light of various perspectives and experiences.

Primarily, this is not about attaining a definite “grasp” on the text, but

rather the pleasure in the text, the joy of contemplating it (cf Ps 1:2); yes, it is about the pleasure and joy in God Himself. After all, it is a game (cf 2.6) in which one deals with the text in an almost naive way, and one rather notes the first experiences or reactions that the text evokes from yourself and others, than unravel it cognitively and in its finest details.

Here, it rather deals with the congregational experience of the text, than the individual clarification of the text. This means, in practice, that preachers can do their rounds in their congregations and, in discussions, members can place their own uncertainties and questions, but also insights and exclamation marks, on the table, in the hope that a table talk within God's family can take place on this – in order to enrich and make the developmental period more bearable. In fact, a congregational, creative play with the text surrounds and is essential in all the phases (cf the models for group sermon discussions in 5.4).

6.8.2.1.3 The third phase in the production of a sermon: Clarification (illumination)

This phase is frequently introduced by an aha-experience, a spark, lightning in which you see as never before – “when the plan comes together” (the motto of the A-Team). This mostly happens spontaneously, when the collected material that had stirred in your mind in the development phase, suddenly begins to adopt particular contours, becomes “streamlined” and starts “falling into place.”

With reference back to our initial definition of creativity: when two divergent issues are linked in an innovating, associative (or bisociative) way, to fulfil a particular new function. In preaching the creative moment exists therein that an innovating connection between the world of the text and the world of the congregation takes place, or preferably, is discovered, with the result that it starts a new reaction or obedience in the congregation.

Suddenly, the angle of incidence of the text to the congregation, or vice versa, becomes clear to the preacher, and he/she sees as though for the first time. Then our eyes are opened to the reality of the invisible God in the light of the reality of the congregation (cf Heb 11:27; also 3.6). Therefore, this clarification phase could also be called a visionary phase in which our spiritual eyes are so enlightened (cf Eph 1:18) to see the world and the congregation within this world through the spectacles of the specific text (cf chapter 4). Suddenly, a vision is born, and the glasses are clear towards God and towards the world

The question: How does the God of the text work in the world of the congregation? is answered – or, at least, approached – in a new way. During the clarification phase the relevance of the text, whether in association with, or in contradiction to, the world, is grasped. This can be in the

form of a question of the text to the world, or vice versa but, in any case, will present a *Kristallisationskern* (Josuttis), a basic idea, a spark of insight into how to stimulate the dialogue between text and reality in a new way. Here, creativity “happens” (6.8.1).

As previously stated, this new connection or bridge can comprise a similarity or analogy between the world of the text and the world of the congregation, although one must deal with this with great care. In sermons, it frequently happens that one searches so frantically for similarities, that the extraordinary, the intractability of the text is limited. Indicative declarations are reversed into paranetic appeals, texts intended for God’s people are individualized, the eschatological dimensions are nationalized; in short, the text’s promising structure is negated. The dialogue or interaction between text and reality is misunderstood as a compromise. Nothing limits its creativity to such an extent as compromises.

Therefore, creative preaching must much rather search for the contrast between text and reality, to a conflict of interests, in order to change the reality, to bend it in the direction of God’s world, which the biblical text proclaims.

6.8.2.1.4 The fourth phase of the process of sermon production: Formation (verification)

The above-mentioned does not mean that the antithetical model is the only hermeneutical model. On the contrary, the following phase, that of formation, tests and structures the newly found clarification until it is feasible for the preacher and the congregation.

In a certain sense, this is the most difficult of all the phases because now the subjective insight must be expressed in objective, symbolic forms (e.g. in language) and the clarification must be communicated in a functional way. Now, words must be found that, like ice picks, can break up frozen lakes in listeners’ hearts (Kafka). Now, that which you have “seen” must be converted into “verbal pictures” so that the listener can also “see” it.

While the clarification phase is directed towards finding a bridge between the text and the world, then the formation phase must lead to this bridge also being constructed in such a way that the back-and-forth traffic between text and world is made possible and can be carried.

How must this be done? Preachers and homiletes have wrestled with this question through the years. The classical model would be to have a (reasonably stereotype) “framework” in which the exegetical “message” can be moulded – a method that often loses sight of the dynamics of the text and, indeed, has congealed it. After all, not all texts present three or six points; not all texts carry the preacher’s biased “theology.”

In his interesting book, *As one without authority*, Fred Craddock deliber-

ately wanted to break out of this schematism. He pleads for an “inductive” process, which means that the sermon, as it were, must allow the preacher’s voyage of discovery with the text to “relive” in the sermon, so that the congregation will gasp for breath, and also will follow the exciting twists of the text, and will call out: aha! The sermon must, as it were, keep the congregation on the edge of their chairs in expectation: What next will we hear? It must contain surprise elements that are not prematurely divulged or are fixed, in anticipation, in a scheme.

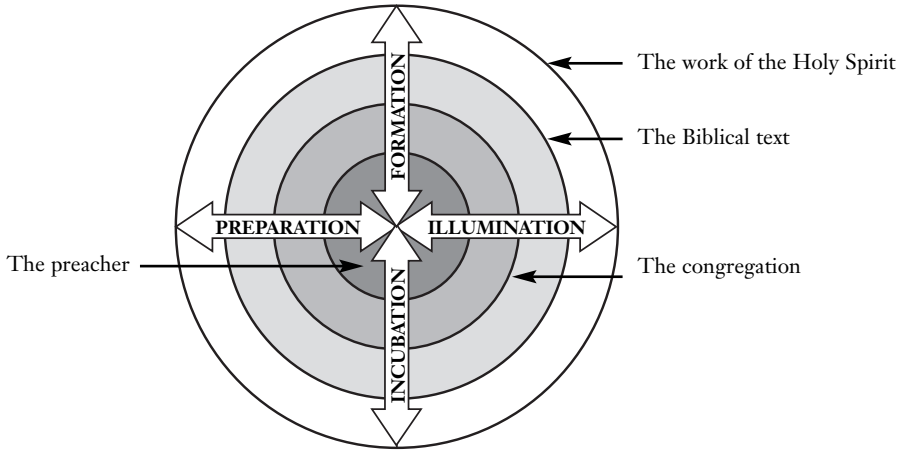
This does not mean that preachers must “structure” or “work up” awe in an artificial manner during the sermon and worship service, but that the awe that they experienced, especially during the clarification phase, must be transferred to their sermons and the worship services and must be kept alive until then – even to be intensified there! The sermon is not merely a description of the awe, but a confession of, and a passion for the awe (Kierkegaard) that is continuously perceptible in the preacher’s style. The inner structure of the sermon – whatever form it adopts – remains that of prayer (Bohren).

Eugene Lowry’s book, *The homiletical plot*, follows another route. He highlights considerably the paradox of a biblical message – almost like the above-mentioned antithetical view of the text. The sermon must deliberately disturb the equilibrium of the listeners, make them tense or, at least, arouse them to ask questions that they otherwise may not have asked. Both Craddock and Lowry wish to return creativity and excitement into the formation of the sermon, deliberately want to move away from a static “perimeter” and allow the emphasis to fall on the discovery of the Gospel’s freshness and dissimilarity.

Something similar is evident in David Buttrick’s presentation in his book, *Homiletic*. He uses the analogy of the camera and wants to demonstrate that human intellect and observation also works thus: if you can “see” something, it will have a far greater influence on you than mere sterile information. The sermon must then present one picture or photo after another to the congregation, so that they eventually can say: “I saw the full picture.” One streamlined “idea” follows another – exactly as in a good film, and thus invites the viewer into a wonderful world.

In the construction process of the bridge between text and world, it fortunately is not only the preacher who plans and builds, but, as seen in chapter 5, the congregation indeed has an important role to play. At least, during the dynamic event of preaching and the worship service, there must be space for the minister’s sermon also to be formed, to grow and develop in a surprising way, also different to what the preacher had planned precisely. Our best sermons do not only “happen” (not yet!) in the study, but especially also on the pulpit!

In conclusion, I must indeed again point out that the creative association of the preacher with the text will not necessarily guarantee a creative sermon. A sermon is a creative event in which the Holy Spirit plays a decisive role (cf 6.6). The Spirit's work surrounds the text, congregation, minister, and all the creative processes that may play a part and takes it in its service – otherwise our creativity degenerates to being a mere tool of church manipulation. The inclusive work of the Spirit could possibly be expressed schematically as follows:



The Spirit surrounds all our efforts! Thus: If you wish to preach creatively, then you cannot but continuously call out:

VENI, CREATOR SPIRITUS!
COME, CREATOR-SPIRIT!

6.9 Preaching as imagination

In the first chapter of this book (1.3) we noted that a culture of images is starting to take root more and more in our society. Naturally, these developments have not left the preacher unmoved. In homiletics (the art of preaching), one finds a shift more and more away from rhetorical excellence to an *imaginative*¹⁹ approach, in which the emphasis is on the importance of the image, and the ability to deal with Scripture imaginatively

19 The term "imagination" has a rich history, and could, indeed, be described from a variety of perspectives and scientific disciplines. For an excellent example, cf Ross-Bryant 1981.

(Wallace 1995:8). Rhetoric, as the classical way in which *convincing* must take place now, for example, is secondary to *poiesis* as the art to *create or to form* by means of words.

This emphasis on images and imagination is concomitant with the advent of the so-called *narrative preaching*,²⁰ which is, *inter alia*, about reclaiming the nature of Scripture itself as the great story of *God's encounter with human beings* and which, in the process, also wishes to regard humans, as the addressees, extremely seriously. Thereafter, a flood of books and articles on preaching expressed this new interest: Wallace 1995, Troeger 1990, 1982 and 1987, Brueggemann 1995, Wilson 1988 and Riebert 1990, to name but a few in order to whet your appetite.

The emphasis on images in preaching must not be conceived as a new, simple recipe. Therefore, what I wish to say in this connection is, at most, a *perspective*, in a certain sense an *experiment* that cannot exist on its own, but must always be practised in conjunction with other preaching *modi*. The guidelines that I introduce (cf 6.9.4), serve merely as *suggestions* that demand critical and creative assessment. For the sake of clarity, I also distinguish between at least four levels upon which the term “image” could function:

- As tacit, and thus non-verbal, presentations of what is found in the human brain. The (night and day!) dreams that we dream could be included here. In this regard, some psychologists refer to archetypical dream structures, as it were, primordial imprinting in which the human existence is condensed. They are about birth, life, sexuality, anxiety, shame, death, etcetera (the archetypical psychologist, James Hillman [1979] calls it “the soul’s language”).
- Images that are verbalized in language. Among them are a whole spectrum of grammatical possibilities, such as *allegories* (symbolic presentations of an abstract concept); *comparisons* (figures of speech in which two things are compared, usually using the word *like*); *parables* (symbolic stories from daily life, especially to relate a religious truth, for example, when Jesus says: the Kingdom of God is *like* ...); *metaphors* (figurative expressions based on comparisons), etcetera.
- Visual images – such as those common in our society (television, computers, films, etc.) and which aim at evoking a certain reaction from people.
- Images locked in texts, in particular, biblical texts. My point of departure is that certain basic images are contained in biblical texts, without which we, as humans, cannot live, images of ourselves, of God, of our

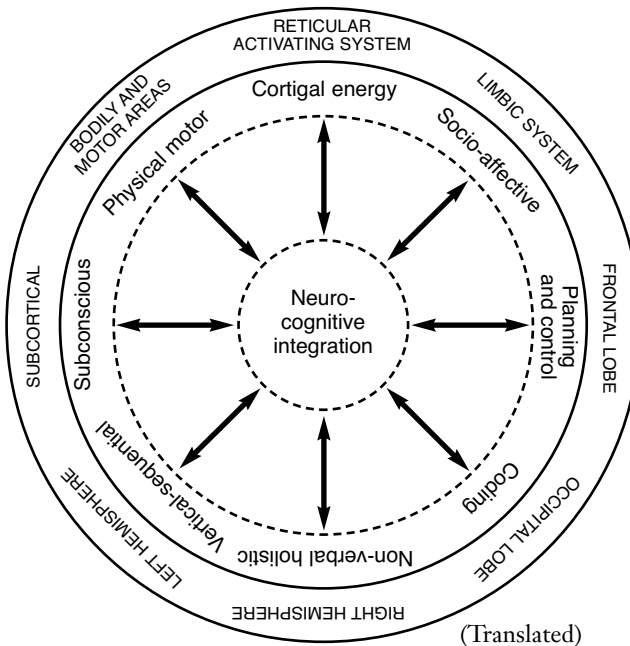
20 For a good orientation, cf Lowry 1980.

world; images that naturally also must be expressed linguistically in the form of metaphors, parables, etcetera.

The hinges of society turn on images. In my opinion, also in preaching, we may not disregard this. However, the development of *preaching, as an imaginal process*, must take place in a balanced way, and indeed take the following into consideration:

6.9.1 BRAIN AND IMAGE: A NEURO-COGNITIVE INTEGRATION

To “think in images” is nothing new – it is a neurological fact. However, we must take care not to think unilaterally about this function of the brain. Neurologists identify no less than eight²¹ neuro-cognitive systems that must cooperate to allow the brain to function optimally. Du Preez (1991:27) illustrates this *neuro-cognitive model of integration* schematically as follows:



The distinction between so-called “left-brain” and “right-brain” people thus is simplistic, and even artificial. What we, at most, could say is that the right hemisphere of the brain (i.e. about image and imagination) is just-

²¹ Cortical energy, coding, planning and controlling, verbal-sequential, non-verbal holistic, physical-motorial, socio-affective and the subconscious (cf Du Preez 1991:26).

tified better when supported by the other neuro-cognitive systems, and that it is *probably also an area that should be applied much better in the communication process (thus preaching)*.

The right hemisphere functions non-verbally, visual-spatially, musically, linguistic-prosaically, and all-seeing (holistic) by nature. For example, to give shape to communication contents visually, could promote cognitive processing in its entirety. Or, in other words: the verbal-sequential system of the brain, or the left hemisphere, can be integrated better through *visual support* in the right hemisphere, thus the total brain function. For instance, words that portray images communicate far better than words that merely connect (abstract) concepts in a logical-analytical way. There is a huge difference between the declaration: “*You help your friend in such a way that you do not put him/her in danger,*” and the figurative speech, or metaphor: “*You do not remove a fly from your friend’s nose with a sledgehammer.*” The one you hear, but the other you “see”!

Many sermons are preached in such a way that you, indeed, can see nothing – not of God, neither of yourself or your fellow humans.²² No windows on, or from, scriptural images are opened. No glimmer of light is allowed in. Not even a streak to arouse your curiosity and make you want to come closer, to look deeper, as in a sermon on Psalm 62:2 (*Only with God do I find rest*). A paragraph from this reads as follows:

To want to rest is a real human need. If this does not happen, we are affected in our most profound core. Without rest, we are plunged into an existential crisis. In fact, one could describe the whole human history as an attempt to move from unrest to rest. Rest is a condition of being quiet, of continuous happiness, of satisfaction. Rest is to be relaxed in spite of circumstances. Rest is another word for faith, and faith knows no tension and uncertainty. To rest is to believe that God reigns.

Except for the cruel – and theologically false – description of faith as something that knows “no tension or uncertainty,” the preacher speaks in general terms, i.e. without existential (his own word!) “points of contact.” The listener must manage somewhere between a vague “real human need,” an “existential crisis,” the “whole human history,” a “condition of being quiet,” and “faith.” The listener drowns in the many words-without-insight. The talk in such a manner about rest tires you or, at least, plunges you into guilt

22 For an extensive discussion of the connection between seeing and preaching, cf Cilliers 1998:31-56, as well as Müller 2002:209; and the old Dutch book, *Vensters in de preek* (1968) also remains an interesting work in this connection; cf too and again chapter 3 of this book.

with the question: Why am I then so (inhumanly) restless? The secret of “being quiet” is not explained anywhere in the sermon. However, a paragraph from another sermon indicates another style:

Who, among us does not need rest? Who among us does not yearn to have a moment to relax, to be able to breathe, to kick off our shoes and come to our senses in our restless society? Silence – oh, I would give my kingdom just for a little silence!

Well, we now do know that there is silence and silence. Perhaps, during the past vacation, you sat beside the sea at sunset and saw how the sun gave you her last wink before going to sleep under the water, and in you there was divine peace. Or, perhaps you have already experienced the indescribable silence when, for the last time, you walk through the house where you lived for 10 or 20 years, and the pantehnicon has already left with your furniture and the empty rooms whisper back to you the sum total of what you experienced here and you realize: there is a time to come, and a time to go Or the strange silence that one sometimes experiences in a cemetery, when the cooing of the doves deepens the silence further and you know: our years flit by like a dream ... and we fly away (Ps 90:9,10).

The chances that sermon number two will claim all the senses, or at least a number of them (neurologically speaking: will stimulate as many as possible of the neuro-cognitive centra), and thus will promote comprehension, certainly is significantly higher than in the case of sermon number one

6.9.2 THE BIBLE AS BOOK OF IMAGES

However, there is another more fundamental reason why we must, and may, preach imaginatively. The Bible itself exists namely, not merely of a string of words, like a string of pearls. Rather it tells the story of God’s involvement with humans, of his great deeds in history (cf Ac 2:11), deeds that figure linguistically (cf again also chapter 4). The Bible is our ancient source of images, to which we must return repeatedly if we want to remain imaginative theologians and preachers. In his classical work about imagination, Garrett Green (1989:106) writes this about the importance of Scripture:

God has im-pressed his image, embodied in Jesus Christ, on the original witnesses, who have in turn ex-pressed that image in certain texts; these writings, which we therefore call sacred, once more im-press their form on us, the modern hearers, reshaping us in the image of God Revelation is

an act of imagination; scripture is a work of imagination; and theology is an interpretation of imagination.

In biblical texts there are indeed a wealth of images or metaphors, also portraying God, images that people profoundly need to live by. *In my opinion, the task of preaching is, inter alia, to regain these vital and life-changing images, and to translate or, rather, to portray them as images for the people of our times.* Amid sensory over-programming, our task is to bring people before the real metaphors, the images that matter. To take them on a guided tour, based on a text, through the art gallery of Life!

The Bible is not merely a Book that proclaims historical facts as *bruta facta*; rather, images and imaginations of these facts, embodied in word and image. These images must continuously be visited, renewed, or else they remain fixed in Scripture. As preachers, our task is to associate imaginatively with the images of Scripture, to say repeatedly and anew, like Jesus Himself: The kingdom of God is *like* ...!

Behind this *like* there is a reality, which always exceeds²³ the image or metaphor that follows. While the Bible indeed presents to us the first and primary imagination of God's acts of salvation, and we thus must return there repeatedly, the intention is not that we must fossilize the images therein. The images have progressive power; they demand creative and thus contemporary imagination. However, images can become dormant or eroded. Then they lose their power of expression, their wealth of imaginative working. If images must first be explained, this is usually a sign that they no longer function as *images* (cf Riegert 1990:73-74). In fact, images that become inflexible run the risk of becoming false prophesies, monuments of a theology that came too late. Images can become idols. Can be judged by the second commandment: "*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything ...* (Ex 20:4).

This turns imaginative preaching into such a risky affair! Neurological integration can help, but it can never replace the work of the Spirit. The Spirit makes us sensitive for the time in which we live, for underlying images, the icons that frequently want to hold us in an iron grip, and He repeatedly teaches us how to re-imagine the biblical images in and against these icons.

Therefore, the Spirit takes us back to Scripture time and again, where

23 Theological language and the metaphor naturally have coexisted for a long time. Janet Soskice (1985:148) writes as follows about the benefits that the use of metaphoric language indeed holds for religion: "*Our concern is with conceptual possibility rather than proof, and with a demonstration that we may justly claim to speak of God without claiming to define Him, and to do so by means of metaphor. Realism accommodates figurative speech which is reality depicting without claiming to be directly descriptive.*"

we can follow his “first” imaginative hermeneutics. To imagine contemporarily, we must be led anew into the imaginative world of the text, or else we imagine wrong things. In my opinion, this remains a basic point of departure: the Bible contains images that have the intrinsic power to take us into the future – so that we can proclaim the old-old tidings, the Gospel, imaginatively in each new time. Wallace (1995:10) writes beautifully:

Images such as the garden, the new heaven and earth, the banquet, bread and wine, oil poured over the head, tears washing feet, fire from above, a newborn infant, and a crucified figure are only some of the ones that continue to throb with numinous power. The task of the preacher is to recover and renew them for the present generation and those to come, so that they are not lost in the mindless haze of imagery substituted by modern technology. Images will continue to be cast and sown into the field of human consciousness; the issue is which of them will take root and flower.

The Bible contains many such basic images, images with which a person can live and die, in which we can see anew our own face, but especially also that of God. One recalls Luther who, repeatedly, could say about one of these primary images of faith: “*Whether I wish to or not, always when I hear the name Christ, I see in my heart the image of the man on the cross*” (cf Milk s.a.:62, translated). No wonder he could preach so imaginatively about Christ!

Luther also said that the church is a mouth-house (“*Mundhaus*”; cf 6.1). However, it would be wrong to interpret this declaration of his unilaterally, as though the church’s understanding of the Bible and preaching must be comprehended only *verbally*, and then also *cognitively*. The Word – of which Scripture testifies – after all, consists not only of words and definitely not only of concepts. *Our* view of the Word probably has strong traces of Greek-Hellenistic influences with a preference for rhetorical logic. We easily become guilty of considering issues and things in an abstract manner instead of allowing our imaginations to play with the text. The Hebrew meaning of *dabār* brings us closer to the truth: the Word is simultaneously also deed, always a Word-event. The Word is not something to be merely analyzed and linguistically unravelled, but a world into which we are invited, a *Word-world within which we are transformed*.

The Word indeed became human (Jh 1:14), and, as such, is both verbal and non-verbal. It would be wrong to view the verbal element as merely something unphysical, and the non-verbal as something physical (Lukken 1990:21). No, the Word is also physical, and therefore visual and “imaged.” Thus, if you wish to preach on this Word, then you cannot do so merely by stringing together words, then think that the visual and physical, yes, the presence of the preacher, does not also present a bodily basis

to the Word, or should do so. The Word – as recorded in Scripture – calls for a holistic verbal and non-verbal portrayal, indeed repeatedly wishes to become human among us.

Symbolism sometimes distinguishes a connection between *presentative and discursive symbolism*. The condensation of the meaning of a symbol, of a simultaneous and total observation is typical of *presentative symbolism* (Lukken 1990:31-32). One image – whether a visual portrayal or a metaphor, i.e. a portrayal-in-words – can evoke a whole series of memories or emotions in a flash. For example, if you discover a photograph of an important event or period in your life, long long ago, then you “see” things that cannot necessarily be expressed in a logical sequence of words. Perhaps your whole life is condensed and presented in that photograph. It possibly addresses all your senses: the aroma in Mother’s kitchen with the AGA stove (this then divulges the writer’s age!), the texture of Father’s cap, the memory of the sound of your brother’s footsteps in the long passage of your parental home.

On the contrary, *discursive symbolism* employs especially language to allow units of meaning to follow each other logically. *I am of the opinion that both these forms of symbolism, or imagination, are important for communication in preaching, that the one must be embedded in the other.* Finding this balance depends on our wishing to preach in a responsible manner for contemporary people who are bombarded from all sides by images. Perhaps we must again become like children here: their first perceptions, therefore images, form the basis upon which their verbal abilities develop. Or, said in a more integrated way: they cannot think of Mother’s voice separate from her face. Can we think of God’s voice (Word) apart from *his* face?

The Word became flesh, and Scripture testifies thereto. The Bible contains the narrative of the incarnation of the Word, of the imaging thereof. Therefore, the Bible has a wealth of images, speaks in a “highly imaginal language” (Wallace 1995:9). The words in the Bible paint pictures; they speak picture-language. We must respect this Book, which is the charter, i.e. the primal source of the Name of God (Bohren 1971:109): herein lies the images that have been saved for us through the ages, and which wait to be developed and liberated afresh in a creative way. *Angels are concealed in scriptural words*, angels who, inter alia, can also receive wings to fly anew in preaching. Alas, many sermons handicap these angels; they prematurely clip the wings of imagination.

Perhaps we find work on the text too arduous. Perhaps we find the text too arduous. Perhaps we are not prepared to continue striking the rock of the text with our little hammers and chisels like Michelangelo, because we do not believe, like he did, that we can liberate an angel from a stone

If you expect angels in scriptural words, then you address the text with

expectation. As a Book of images, the Bible demands a particular kind of approach, a style of reading, of exegesis and, ultimately, preaching. Preaching is an adventure in a twofold sense: to search for the *dominant image* in a specific text, and to translate it imaginatively, yes, in order to relate it to the people of our day. Wallace (1995:18) writes:

Imaginal preaching calls for a particular way of approaching our task. Rather than looking for the main idea, the key thought, we search for the dominant image in the story, the letter, the prophetic word, that image which will control all that we say, that will serve thought, feeling and motivation. Imaginal preaching also calls us to attend to the images that we are given by life and by the faith tradition we serve; but it is most important that we first look and listen attentively to those found in the primary sources for preaching, the biblical texts.

Therefore, we approach Scripture focusing on the basic images, may I say the images of the Gospel, to connect them with the images of our society, of the world in which we live. Herein lies the creative tension of preaching, in the question: What will happen if this scriptural image, this dominant “picture” of the text – whether a character, a moment in a story, or a key metaphor – has an encounter with this or that aspect of our lives? What will happen if the biblical images of life as *contra-images* come into conflict with the flood of idols that want to fill our lives? *What images do we allow to form our realities?*

In brief: preachers are mediators between the metaphors of Scripture and the metaphors of our daily realities, searching for contact points, for strengthening the good metaphors of life, but also sensitive to the fact that the metaphor of the Gospel may not be superficialized to the less virtuous, and even to evil metaphors that surround us. Preachers are people who must climb into the worlds of the text and life in order to truly see and understand the dominant images in both. What an awesome thought: preachers move back and forth over the bridge between the text and life as *mediators and guardians of images and metaphors – also those of the Gospel!*

6.9.3 THE WORKING OF IMAGES ...

There is something mysterious about the working of images, something that indeed cannot be, or must be, described. In my opinion, the following is indeed important for our subject:

- *The relationship between image and power of expression.* Images serve words, or preferably: they bring dimensions of words to the fore that

otherwise would have passed unnoticed. In a sense, images *delay* the (rapid, often thoughtless) flood of words in order to *enrich* them. Images help us to move from “*thin*” to “*thick descriptions of reality*” in our communication processes (cf Brueggemann 1997:73 ff). Words alone can be very meagre and clinical. On the contrary, images change our (modernistic) tendency to implement *digital* communication to *analogue* communication, opens windows on reality that words alone could not do. An interesting example is the use of images by a poet such as Sheila Cussons. Apparently, she continuously plays between image and word.²⁴ Sometimes she literally first paints on canvas an image that is in her mind, before she converts it into the words of a poem. Sometimes the two processes take place simultaneously, and the arts of painting and poetry are combined into one creative phase. Sometimes, only after she has written the poem, she makes a painting or a portrayal thereof. When her friends sometimes telephone to ask her what she is doing, she answers: “*I’m thinking.*” She knows from experience that creativity needs time, that it can take a long time for the *angel to pass through your head*, as the title of her volume of poetry (*’n Engel deur my kop*: 1997) says.

- *Images re-imagine reality.* It happens as follows: firstly, there is a moment of *orientation*, in which you recognize certain familiar things in the image: the image addresses something of your reality. Then the phase of *disorientation* follows (not necessarily sequentially; mostly simultaneously), when the image questions your reality and, in a sense, overturns it. Biblical images mostly work thus: a familiar metaphor suddenly becomes challenging, works subversively on the status quo. A small piece of yeast becomes an image of an inexorable kingdom (Mt 13:33)! Scriptural images indeed often are contra-images, images that give us an “imaginative shock,” which present to us as a “counter-as,” the dissimilar “like” of the kingdom (cf Riegert 1990:72-74; also Brueggemann 1993:15). After the disorientation, a phase of *reorientation* follows, in which the image opens the prospects of new possibilities and worlds to us, and, indeed, function as world-creating powers. Biblical images are like fingers that point in the direction of God’s alternative, and beckon closer ...

24 As is evident from a recitation by Amanda Botha, visiting curatrix of the Sasol Art Museum at Stellenbosch, when introducing some of Sheila Cussons’s works of art during the annual Word Festival (27 Feb 2002). Also summarized in *Die Burger* of 4 March 2002, p. 4 (translated): “*For her (Cussons) image and word are always in interaction with each other. Paintings become poems, poems become paintings – literally and figuratively. Here life is divided between drawings and poems – for her it is only important to work.*”

- *However, Images remain mere fragments.* They portray only a part of the whole – in this case, of the kingdom. Biblical texts are small pieces of the puzzle of the great image. They offer pieces, in fact dynamic, pulsing pieces, but only pieces of the greater picture. They are, at most, a portrayal of the ancient image or, preferably: ultimate image. Images are our best attempt to portray the invisible. However, they remain provisional: *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face* (1 Cor 13:12).

6.9.4 PREACHING AS RE-IMAGINING: A FEW GUIDELINES

A few brief guidelines for the development and implementation of images in preaching now follow:

- Work hard on the text; continue to hammer and chisel at it. To find the *dominant image* in the text, indeed, asks for a continuous encounter with it, a meticulous (historical, exegetical and hermeneutical) commitment to it, but not merely to distil cognitive information or *bruta facta* or a vague “theme” from it; rather to experience its “mood and movement” (cf Buttrick 1987:294 ff). In a certain sense, one has to choose the right kind of music to reflect the mood of the text! Would those who wish to preach on Psalm 150, not have to breathe the “atmosphere” of Händel’s Hallelujah Choir? Or those attempting Psalm 88, should they not first have to lament with Händel’s *He was despised* about the Suffering Servant (Isa 53)?
- Do not try to explain the image! It is typical of modernism to want to pierce everything to the bone, to want to discuss all mystery and thus actually talk it to death. *Do not change the image into a concept.* Do not try to unravel its working cognitively by summarizing it, and then even “applying” it. Allow the image to follow its own direction and so broaden its “power of expression.” After all, texts are not directed to the mere transfer of *information*, but to *performance*: they have an intention, an objective, namely to *transform* people. Allow the image to transfer its message by itself. Remember: the image does not only bear a message, in a certain sense, it is the message. “*The medium is the message*” (Marshall MacLuhan). In general, it is a valid rule in the world of communication science, but no less in preaching.
- Regard an image from various perspectives; turn it to all sides like a diamond for a greater appreciation of its many facets. Thereafter, become one of the characters in the narrative to repeatedly enable a view from another angle. However, this does not mean that we must complicate an image: it must still remain simple, and have a *limited code*, that can be

unlocked by adults as well as children (cf Lukken 1990:33). Herein, probably, lies the power of an image: it can address a highly intellectual person, as well as a child in ways that only words cannot do. *It can say things that are too profound and wonderful for words.*

- Mould an image in a particular form. *In my opinion, here lies one of the most difficult assignments for preaching: to portray the primary image of Scripture in a form that contemporary people would comprehend best – without losing the essence of this primary image in the process.* Here we must be careful not to plasticize scriptural images and not to damage scriptural art with homiletical and liturgical kitsch (cf Wepener & Müller 2001: 480-493). The boundary between art and kitsch, between aesthetics and commercialization, indeed, is vague. Here, the ability, the gift, to be able to “image” with integrity, and to re-imagine are at issue. Here, the worlds of drama and art, but also of literature, could help us immensely. The primary images of Scripture can be imaged in more than one way, in the whole spectrum of the nonverbal, perhaps in silences, and naturally also in words – in the hope that humans will be touched in all their senses. Therefore, it is important not to view a primary scriptural image as a static picture, as a still-life (a static dry arrangement!), but rather as a *scene* in a (salvific) drama, in which the preacher and the listeners are drawn in to become part of the Great Story, but also as a scene with *atmosphere* (mood), that must enter *me*.

6.10 Examples of sermons containing preachers’ failed (moralistic) functioning

One is rarely as conscious of the fact that you are but a tiny person – arisen from the dust – as on the pulpit (Calvin). Yet, those who dare this are not for nothing called *verbi divini minister*, minister of the Divine Word. They have received a specific assignment and a specific authority that in no way can be redirected back to any potential born from their dust-existence. They are undeserving ministers, namely that of Christ.

The assignment and the authority of all preachers of the Word reside in the proclamation of the Gospel. They were not called merely to make announcements about salvation, but rather announcements of salvation. Those who preach, in any case in the Reformed sense of the Word, do not demand people’s justification, but administer the grace of God to them. In legalistic sermons, precisely this does not happen. Although it takes place in a variety of nuances, the sequence is precisely reversed: grace is conditional upon the religious person’s (*homo religiosus*) potential and actions and, in reality, is shunted out. The questions that push forward are: What

role do preachers play in this process of reversal? What position do they take? What typical characteristics can be inferred from the analysis of moralistic sermons?

6.10.1 A SHIFT FROM THE BASIS OF AUTHORITY

The first that comes into focus is the subtle shift of the basis of authority away from the text and God to the person of the preacher. The preacher begins to do what only the Word and God can do, starts to know what only God could know. In a particularly flagrant example of this, we hear sentences such as the following: *“This morning, I invite you to allow the Holy Spirit to change your thinking.”* Who initiates the salvation here? The Holy Spirit? The preacher? The listener? Who is the agent here who must realize all that the sermon discusses?

The following is also a significant sentence: *“This morning the Lord wants you to think about life in a certain manner.”* One often finds this in legalistic sermons: preachers who know exactly not only what the listeners want to do but especially also what the Lord wants and, indeed, does in the sermon: *“Therefore, the Lord also speaks to you this morning by saying ... It is God who at this moment is making you conscious in a supernatural way of his involvement with you While you are listening to me you are conscious of the fact that God is speaking to you. It is because He now is involved with you through his Holy Spirit.”*

In the closing prayer of a worship service, the following preacher articulates his absolute certainty about people’s thoughts and God’s works thus:

But, while I administer the Word, there were people who said that I yearn for it. Thank You Lord, that, through the Holy Spirit, You have already brought about change, that the people already have renewed their thoughts. But, thank You very much that You now have changed their attitudes in a supernatural way and that they realize that God has made them new Thank You Lord that You have also served those who are in a crisis in this morning. Thank You that You have helped those who are in need this morning, although their circumstances are still the same, their predisposition is different, because You have renewed their thoughts.

One could certainly accept that these are all things that the preacher would have liked to see happen, so much so that he even uses a type of prophetic perfectum for it. However, it is a question whether all is so in reality, or has happened as the preacher has expressed it.

One hears a similar tendency in another sermon: *“We are at the end of an outreach week where we reached so many hearts, have touched so many people,*

brought so many into touch again with a new life that we find in Jesus Christ, through music, singing, and a radio transmission." How does the preacher know all this? Does he have insights in God's council that other ordinary believers do not have? Does he in this way render (supernatural) legitimacy to his ministry?

What the Lord desires, says and does is often presented as identical to what the preacher wants, says and does: "... *via the Word, the Lord says to you this morning This morning I say to you ... that is why you must now listen to me.*" "I told you that God wants ...," etcetera. Actually, the preacher places his sermon in God's mouth.

To what must we ascribe this authoritarian style that sometimes borders on megalomania? It could be a logical consequence of the fact that legalistic sermons have departed from the authority of the text. Therefore, substitutes must be sought and the most obvious are: the preachers themselves! They must take over where the text and God Himself, are no longer active. Therefore, preachers present themselves as people who cannot be weak, may not be weak, as people who have fulfilled all the requirements of the biblical text in their own persons, who stand before the congregation as the absolute example of someone who could fulfil what the sermon appeals to the congregation. These preachers' experience must then motivate their listeners to reach for the impossible, to exert themselves to attain a similar standard. Sometimes the examples of virtuous believers are presented to the congregation with exactly the same objective, namely, that they can be, or become, what other people were, or are. There is nothing as unbearable as a demand that comes from a virtuous example! (Mark Twain).

In many sermons, the presumed source of authority, thus, is the preacher him-/herself. Suffice to close with a last sentence: "*The devil has certainly come to every service that I've ever preached. The sound goes wrong, people fall down, they sneeze and cough and do all kinds of things because the devil disturbs people.*" How the devil does the preacher know that the devil attends every sermon that he preaches? Is this not a way to bring the listeners under the impression of the authority with which he/she (always) speaks? A person who can even move the devil certainly must have authority, not so?

6.10.2 Hermeneutics of the "I"

The great number of "I's" that teem in so many sermons is significant. Sometimes, the sermon exists literally of only a dialogue between the I of the preacher and the congregation, without it ever becoming a dialogue between God and his congregation. After all, much can be inferred from the way in which preachers use the words, "we," "I," "you," "they,"

etcetera, and especially the connections that they presume or lay between these concepts. It would not be exaggerating to say that the preacher often, in his/her person with his/her insights, experiences, faith, etcetera, becomes the point of revelation of the sermon, that all lines of proclamation are joined and unravelled in a hermeneutics of the “I.” A good (bad!) example of this is a sermon in which the second paragraph is introduced thus: *“Should I ask you a question this evening, and I would say ‘what is an outstanding characteristic of a Spirit-filled child of the Lord?’ then I believe we will hear many answers this evening.”*

This is followed by a long list of answers that the preacher provides on behalf of the congregation, but which ultimately also are swept off the table or, at least, are relativized: *“I think that these answers could perhaps allow us, in a certain sense, to see what is right But, do you know, Jesus Christ gives us the clearest answer and the correct answer”*

The preacher is the one who asks the questions, and even provides the congregation’s answers thereto, even declares them as wrong, and even comes to the fore with the correct solution – as the congregation does not share in his/her insights in Christ’s answers. The preacher’s “I” brings about and completes the “hermeneutical circle.” This is evident all though the rest of the sermon, where we hear *ad nauseum*: *“And I want ...”; “I want to tell you ...”; “I want to tell you you live in abominable sin. You say: ‘How do you manage it?’ I succeed because the Word of the Lord says to us ... ‘Be filled with the Holy Spirit’” [sic]; “I know there’s an entire transformation that must take place in your life, “ etcetera.* This preacher knows all, wants all, says all, and does all that is necessary to make his sermon “work.” In reality or, at least, grammatically speaking, no space is left in the hermeneutics of the “I” for the work of grace, and the Gospel is put out of action. “I” replaces it.

6.10.3 THE PREACHER BECOMING LONELY

But ... in spite of the front of authority that one presents, no person can continue to live with such an unbearable responsibility. Ultimately it strikes back on those who live in this delusion, revenges the awful burden of always having to know, of always having to be strong. This can lead to pessimism and resignation, to preaching fatigue and homiletical burnout – which is common to many preachers. The dominant effect of this false authority, ironically enough, is loneliness. By nature of their profession, preachers sometimes are lonely people. The meaning of the ecclesial discourse (chapter 5.4), inter alia, is just this: to break through the silence of the congregation, but also the loneliness of the preacher, by it removing from the minister’s shoulders the tremendous burden of always proclaim-

ing the whole truth with absolute certainty and spreading it in the congregation as the interlocutors. On the contrary, legalism preys on individualism. It leaves the congregation as individuals alone with a biblical text that they must make true for themselves. However, the loneliest of all is the isolated individual, the preacher. He/she must appear on the pulpit as one who has already fulfilled the commands of the text, already has fulfilled in his/her own person what is called for of the congregation. But ... who is capable of this?

6.10.4 A SLIP OF THE TONGUE?

One of the most significant discoveries made through the analysis of moralistic sermons is that preachers (unconsciously?) feel that something is wrong in the sermon. Time and again, sentences appear that could be interpreted as attempts to put right what has gone wrong, to, as it were, formulate the problem of their own sermon's defect – and to say that they, in fact, do not intend doing this! The following could almost be regarded as a rule: the moment when a preacher allows elements of the hermeneutical undergirding of his/her sermon to come to the surface as a point of discussion, then acts in defence thereof, then he/she thereby indicates the deeper-seated problem of the sermon. I made a list of a few of these declarations, which, in the particular cases, indeed, betrayed the true structure of the sermon:

“Herein, no certain necessities or special conditions that you should fulfil, are at issue.”

“Then we must also learn this: we must express less of an opinion about the Word of God, and allow God's Word itself to speak.” (!)

A fairly blatant example:

“As we look at this text I just pulled out three particular points that struck me when I read it, that seemed to be appropriate to us all today.”

And, in a sermon that totally misses the biblical text and rather misuses the text – and Christ – as a textbook of, and example for, teenage psychology:

“That is just a bit of totally irrelevant information that I thought you might like to have.”

6.10.5 A BROKEN AUTHORITY ...

That the authority of the preacher depends wholly on the authority of Scripture (chapter 4) has already been pointed out. This does not imply merely repeating the scriptural letter, but an authority that depends entirely upon whether God will speak through the biblical text and the sermon (chapter 3). Preachers' authority resides in their having no authority. They are, indeed, *as one without authority* (cf the title of Craddock's book, 1971).

Preachers' power is a powerless power; their authority is a broken authority. Something of this usually filters through in the sermon's structure, and affects the way in which language is applied in the process of proclamation. Bethel Müller (1973:135) writes movingly:

Preaching wants to serve the encounter between the living God and his living congregation by the proclamation of the living Word. A person cannot bring about or create this encounter; neither by methodology nor by powers of oratory. It remains the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. But, a person can and must be subservient to this encounter in preaching. He must do it by thorough exegesis, by wrestling for the correct interpretation, by a zealous search for the perspectives of revelation and by a tireless urge to interpret ... but especially also to go and stand in the centre of the encounter. Only those who have truly listened to the Word would be touched, injured, wounded by it ... and only those who are wounded by the text are able to preach. Therefore, the structure of the sermon remains a broken and dejected structure, a crossed-out structure In this manner Scripture guards the text and also the structure and language of preaching: it can only be the stammering language and broken structure of one who has been grabbed by the text ... because he, himself, has been grabbed by Jesus Christ.

When Paul has to explain the ABC of his authority as an apostle, the basic principle of his ministry, in a few sentences, actually in a single word, he does so in the little word *cross* (cf 1 Cor 2:2). In the Pauline letters, this term is an indication of the total earthly ministry of Jesus, his total life of suffering: from his incarnation in Bethlehem until his crucifixion on Golgotha. In this, he lays down the basic pattern for the action and style of the church, and therefore also the preaching, namely the authority of the cross. A broken style presumes a preacher that has been crossed out by the text, yes touched *by the cross in the text*. Herein resides our authority. But what a strange authority! Because the cross apparently is the image of powerlessness, even defeat. But, what to the world is the nonsense of God

is greater wisdom than human wisdom, and what to the world is God's weakness is greater power than human power (1 Cor 1:25).

Nonsense. Utter and complete foolishness. That is preaching.

But, when a *preacher* receives the grace to be able to preach to a *congregation* on a *text* so that the *presence of Christ* becomes visible, then other descriptions apply:

Power, that works immeasurably within us (Eph 3:20).

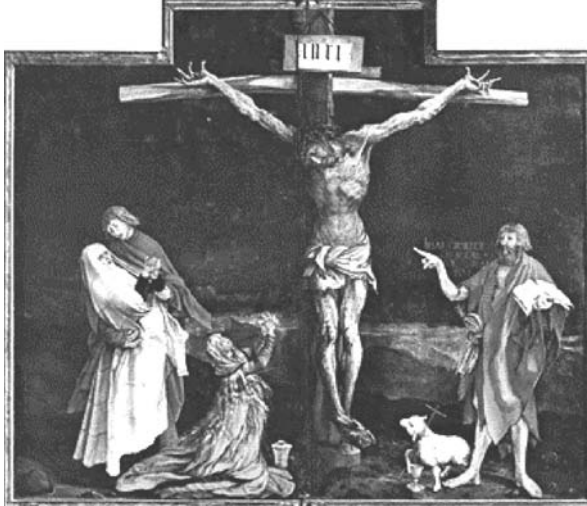
Wisdom, utter and complete wisdom!

That... is *preaching*.

Sermon example 4

THERE IS THE LAMB GOD...!

(John1:19-34)



The well-known painter Matthias Grunewald once painted a moving picture of the crucifixion on the altar of the abbey hospital in Isenheim. In this painting, hands play an important role. For example, there are the outstretched, praying hands of Mary Magdalene, as well as those of Mary, the mother of Jesus. There are the hands of John the Evangelist, holding Mary, and then, of course, there are the grotesque, contorted hands of the Crucified nailed to the wooden cross. The hands of John the Baptist are also conspicuous. With his one hand he grasps a book, probably a Biblical parchment, and with the other he points towards the crucified One. His index finger is conspicuously large, in fact larger than life. One senses that his whole body is behind, or rather within, this finger. In this finger lies his essence, his character, yes, his whole identity as the Baptist: to point out the Lamb of God as the One who takes away the sins of the world ...

Identity. How much has this concept been debated in our times and also in the church! Who, or what is the church, and what role should it, for instance, play in a country like South Africa? What is our calling and in what do our highest priorities lie? What is the role of congregants and congregations, of church councils and ministers?

Of course, we are not the first to ask these questions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, asks from his jail cell: Am I really that which other people say about me? Or am I just that which I know about myself? Of course, he went further by asking: Am I, ultimately, that which God knows and says about me? Yes, who am I before God?

In this regard, our text offers a moving answer; in fact it paints a picture before our eyes. John the Baptist is busy preaching in Israel, proclaiming that God's threatening judgement has come close and that the axe is already striking the roots of the tree. One is coming with his winnowing shovel in his hands to thresh out all the grain. He will gather his wheat into his barn, but he will burn the chaff in an unquenchable fire (cf Mt. 3:1-12). Like a mediator, a bridge figure, John the Baptist stands there, his one foot still in the world of the Old Testament, but the other already in the New.

So imposing is he that the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem sends an official delegation to enquire about his identity. They circle around him; bombard him with one question after another:

"Who are you?"

"I am not the Christ"

"Are you Elijah?" (Some believed that Elijah would be resurrected to become a forerunner to the Messiah.)

"No, I am not."

"Then, are you the Prophet?" (We do not know which Messianic forerunner is meant.)

"No!"

John the Baptist takes three steps backwards, putting Christ in the light. Remarkable is especially his first answer. In fact, he does not answer the question put to him at all. They asked him: *"Who are you?"* He answers in the negative: *"I am not the Christ."* This answer is of great importance to the church. We often overstep our limits; we are vain and conceited. We often act as if Christ's judgement is our judgement, as if we, the church, have control over Christ's Kingdom, as if we are the main character in the drama of God's plan for salvation. We often overplay our hand: we may think that we are pointing towards Christ, when, in fact, we are waving a judgemental finger in the direction of the world.

Luther was so under the impression of this human tendency, that he started his sermon on these verses in exactly this tenure:

Each one of us by nature wants to be a Christ. This heresy is so deep seated in us that no human heart can free itself from it, because our whole nature is filled and poisoned by this yearning ... The human nature objects to being

stripped completely and being dependent on Christ only, to build on nothing else but Christ without our works or wisdom ... It is the highest art that a person should not betray Christ but confess Him, because this natural plague is so inherent in us that everyone wants to be a Christ. Yes, we all suffer from the fact that we want to be Christ, that is Someone that can help and change me ... For this reason this Gospel has been written: that all that want to be true Christians should learn this art as well as possible, that they are not the Christ.

“I am *not* the Christ,” John the Baptist declares and so defines his identity. Perhaps I could paraphrase his answer as follows:

I am not the One for whom you are longing so. I am not the Saviour; do not have the words of eternal life, neither the answers to your life's questions. I am not the solution to your problems, do not offer meaning for life, neither do I mend what is broken. I cannot free you from your sin, cannot take your guilt upon me and cannot declare you justified. If you are looking to me for these things me, you have the wrong address. The address is there – there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!

This is a threefold negation, a threefold no! Yet it is also more than a mere threefold emphasis of the Baptist's modesty, more than a mere denial of who he is not. It rather is a designation, a pointing out of He who *is*. But if you now follow the direction in which the finger of the Baptist is pointing, your breath could be taken away. Because, what do you see? The Man from Nazareth, Jesus, the One who, historically speaking, was born from Mary's womb. He is called: Lamb of God.

This title summarizes the whole mystery of the Gospel. Jesus Christ, the Lamb, reveals the full content of the Kingdom to us. He Himself *is* the Kingdom of God, the source and guarantee, the beginning and end of this Kingdom. And here He stands before us! The One who comes to reveal and actualize the judgement of God, who stands with the axe in his hand, ready to strike the roots of the tree and who holds the winnowing shovel in his hands to thresh out all the grain ... is a Lamb! The One in whose hands are the axe and the shovel is the One whose hands hang contorted, nailed to the cross!

Therein, in Him, lies the hope for our world: the One who reveals our sins is the One who takes them away; the One who judges is the One who takes this judgement on Himself. Yes, in this Lamb lies the hope for all the people on this earth, for the people of our continent, our country, our towns and cities, for each and every one of us.

Herein also resides the identity of the church: to point towards Him, to

proclaim and celebrate Him, and Him alone. That is what and who we are: a mouthful of hope, a finger that points ahead ... towards Him. We are creatures of God, yes, new creations, who witness about the grace of God, about Christ. All lines flow towards Him and all rays of light shine from Him. He is the content of the being of the church, of our preaching and theology. In fact, Paul states this as the crux of his ministry: *For it is not ourselves that we preach; we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake* (2 Cor. 4:5). One recalls Spurgeon's first words on the pulpit of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London where he ministered for many years:

I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist; I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist; but if I am asked what is my creed, I reply: "It is Jesus Christ." ... The legacy to which I would pin and bind myself forever, God helping me, is Jesus Christ, who is the arm and substance of the Gospel, who is in Himself all theology, the incarnation of every precious truth.

Or, remember the confession of Martin Luther, which he often repeated: to preach nothing else but Jesus Christ ...

Herein lies the secret of the church's identity. We may not, *cannot* be anything but what we *are*. A hand, a finger, a witness...

Whether we are in a meeting or in a worship service; whether we are drinking a cup of tea or attending a prayer gathering, this should be heard: *There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!* When we reach out to the world and roll up our sleeves to tackle the problems surrounding us, the poverty, need and suffering, the reaching out of our hands should be a pointing finger and an exclamation: *There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!* Herein, all our judgements and pre-judgements, our planning and structuring, our zeal for renewal and our loyalty towards traditions should be measured: *There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!*

A hand, a finger, a mouth ... articulating *the living voice of the gospel*.

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